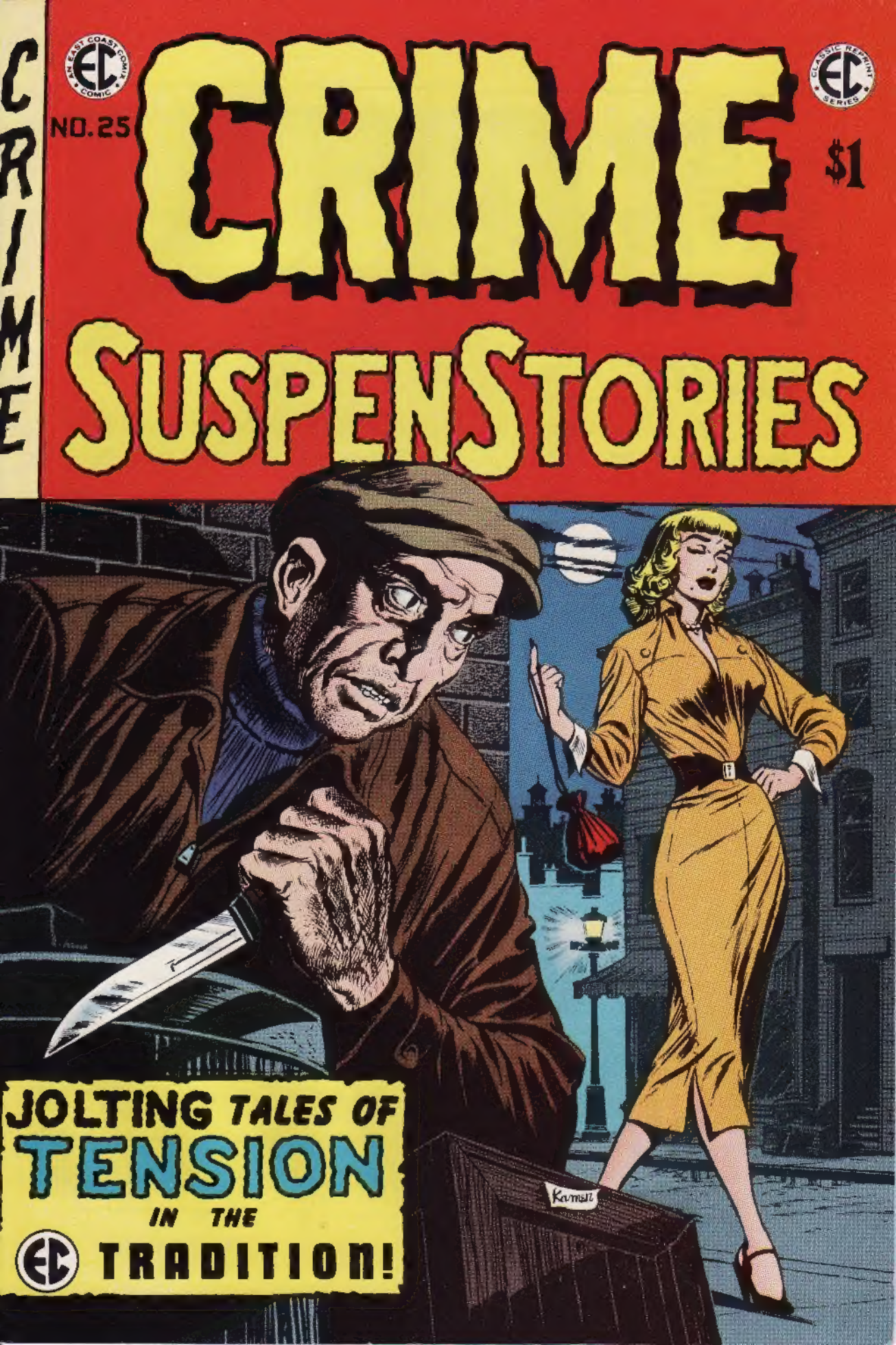
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NO. 25
CRIME
SUSPENSTORIES
CLASSIC REPRINT SERIES
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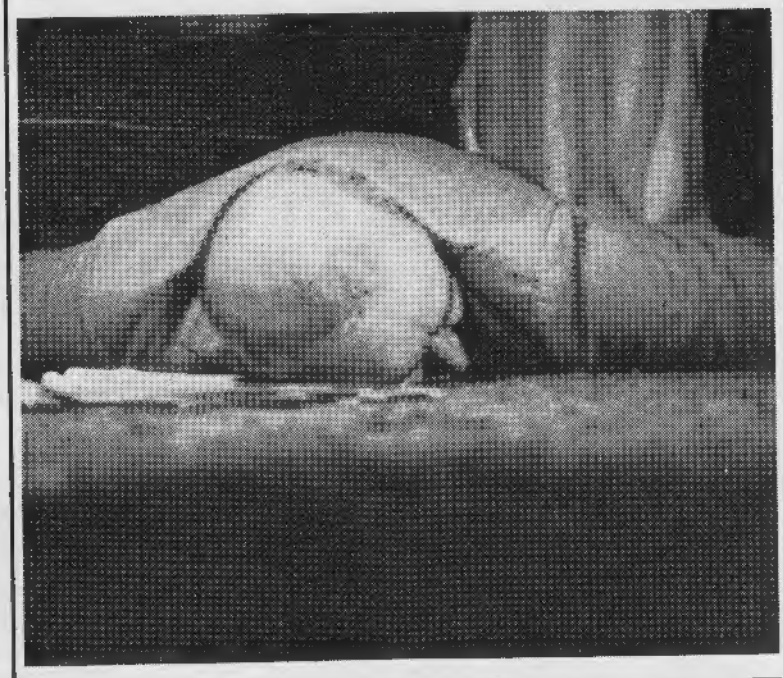
"ARTIST OF THE ISSUE" • GEORGE EVANS



George R. Evans was born Feb. 5, 1920, in Harwood, Pennsylvania, of English and Pennsylvania Dutch ancestry. When George was nine, his family moved to Kulpmont, Pa., a coal mining town. George's early art training came at fifteen from a correspondence course, which he paid for by working as a store clerk, coal-trucker, and mill hand. He also attended the Scranton Art School for one year. At 16, he had already started to sell illustrations to airplane pulp magazines, supplementing his income by sign-painting. Came the war, and George spent three years in the AAF, where, by diligence, application, and K.P., he rose to the grade of Pfc. Decorations: one (1) Good Conduct Medal, grudgingly awarded. While in the army, George was stationed for a spell on Long Island. He liked it so much that upon being discharged, he came back there to live with his bride, whom he'd married six months previously. After returning to civilian life, George's first job was as a staff artist for another comic publishing house. He also attended night classes at the Art Students League in N.Y.C. before joining the E.C. staff in 1953. George's work ... which was always enthusiastically received by E.C. readers ... appeared in E.C.'s three horror mags, two war mags, and the SuspenStory mags. After the E.C. days George put his brilliant talents to work for CLASSICS COMICS and DELL COMICS. In 1960 George began tackling artistic chores on the well known syndicated strip "TERRY AND THE PIRATES." Dropping TERRY in 1972, George rejoined the comic book industry. Since then he has worked for a number of publishers, but his greatest joy is drawing for D.C.'s war books. George and his lovely wife Evelyn are now living in a cute little ranch house in Levittown, Long Island. His hobbies include: aviation ... especially World War I vintage, loafing, sports of all kinds, loafing, eating, and ... you guessed it ... loafing!

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THREE for the MONEY

I PUT DOWN THE PHONE BEFORE I'D EVEN BEGUN DIALING AND STOOD PARALYZED, MY SCALP CRAWLING, AS THE GUN SHOT ECHOED THROUGH THE HOUSE. THEN, I RUSHED INTO THE GLASS-ENCLOSED PORCH-STUDY WHERE I'D LEFT JOEL ONLY A MOMENT BEFORE. THE ACRID SMELL OF GUN POWDER FILLED THE ROOM, WAFTED ABOUT BY THE BREEZE FROM THE OPEN CASEMENT WINDOWS. JOEL STILL SAT AT HIS DESK WHERE I'D LAST SEEN HIM, A LOOK OF DEATH ON HIS FACE. I SCREAMED. I COULDN'T *HELP* IT. I SCREAMED *TWICE* IN SHOCK AND SURPRISE AND DISMAY. I SCREAMED AT THE SIGHT OF THE RAW RED *BULLET-HOLE* IN JOEL'S FOREHEAD... AND I SCREAMED AT THE SIGHT OF THE UGLY *KNIFE*, BURIED TO THE HILT, STICKING AWKWARDLY OUT OF HIS BACK...

A MOVEMENT ON THE LAWN OUTSIDE THE WINDOW FACING JOEL CAUGHT MY EYE... A *MAN'S DIM FIGURE* RUNNING OFF INTO THE DARKNESS...

AND THEN, THROUGH THE WINDOW AT JOEL'S BACK, I SAW ANOTHER FIGURE SCAMPERING AWAY... DISAPPEARING INTO THE GLOOM OF THE FORMAL GARDENS. . .

AND THEN THE WHOLE THING MADE *SENSE*... THE WHOLE CRAZY THING SUDDENLY FORMED ITS *INCREDIBLE PICTURE.* JOEL HAD BEEN ATTACKED *SIMULTANEOUSLY* BY *TWO DIFFERENT MEN*... EACH IGNORANT OF THE OTHER'S PRESENCE UNTIL IT WAS *TOO LATE!* AND *I*...I *KNEW* WHO THESE MEN *WERE!* I WENT *BACK* TO THE TELEPHONE AND *THIS* TIME I *DIALED.* I DIALED THE *POLICE*...

H-HELLO, *POLICE?* SOB... SOB... I WANT... I WANT TO REPORT A... A... *MURDER!* MY... MY *HUSBAND*... SOB...

AFTER I HUNG UP, I RETURNED TO THE STUDY, TOOK THE LETTER FROM THE DESK, AND BURNED IT IN THE FIREPLACE...

AND IN TEN MINUTES, CONSTABLE STEBBINS AND HIS ASSISTANT ARRIVED, BREATHLESS...

WHAT *HAPPENED,* MRS. THATCHER? YOU SAID ON THE PHONE...

HE... SOB... HE'S *IN THERE!* MY *HUSBAND!* HE'S... CHOKE... *DEAD!*

THEY RUSHED INTO THE STUDY... LOOKED AT THE BULLET-HOLE IN JOEL'S HEAD... THE KNIFE IN HIS BACK... AND THE OPEN WINDOWS. THEN THEY LOOKED AT ME...

HOW'D IT *HAPPEN,* MRS. THATCHER?

I... I DON'T *KNOW!* I WAS IN THE *HALL!* I HEARD A *SHOT.* I *RUSHED IN*... AND... SOB...

JOEL... SOB... LAY *SPRAWLED* THERE... LIKE *THAT*... SOB... NOT *MOVING*.. *DEAD!* I SAW A *MAN* RUNNING AWAY... THROUGH *THAT* WINDOW... AND *ANOTHER MAN* RUNNING AWAY... THROUGH *THAT* WINDOW.

TWO MEN, MRS. THATCHER? ARE YOU *SURE?*

I'LL TAKE A LOOK *OUTSIDE,* CHIEF!

I'M *SURE,* CONSTABLE! I SAW *TWO MEN!* AND THEN I SAW THE *KNIFE*... CHOKE... AND THE *BULLET HOLE* IN HIS HEAD... CHOKE... AND I *KNEW* WHAT THEY'D *MURDERED JOEL*... *MURDERED HIM*... SOB... *MURDERED MY HUSBAND*...

YOU'D BETTER *SIT DOWN,* MRS. THATCHER. AND... ER... *PLEASE* TRY TO *CONTROL* YOURSELF! I *KNOW* HOW YOU FEEL... BUT *HYSTERICS* WON'T DO *ANYBODY* ANY GOOD!

ALVIN HARPER, CONSTABLE STEBBINS' ASSISTANT, RETURNED A FEW MOMENTS LATER...

THE LADY'S *RIGHT*, CHIEF! THERE'RE *FRESH FOOTPRINTS* IN THE BEDS OUT *BOTH THOSE WINDOWS!* AND I FOUND *THIS*... OUTSIDE *THAT* ONE...

A .45 *SHELL!* AND *THAT'S* THE WINDOW THATCHER WAS *FACING!* THEN, IF WHAT MRS. THATCHER SAID IS *TRUE*...

...THIS IS A *DOUBLE MURDER! TWO MEN* KILLED THE *SAME VICTIM* AT THE *SAME TIME!* ONE *SHOT* HIM...ONE THREW A *KNIFE* AT HIM!

TO A SMALL-TOWN CONSTABLE, THIS WAS A UNIQUE AND INCOMPREHENSIBLE CASE. MURDER WAS A RARITY HERE. OUR THREE-CELL JAIL HOUSE WAS EMPTY MOST OF THE TIME...

I...I'VE GOT TO ASK YOU A FEW *QUESTIONS*, MRS. THATCHER! WOULD YOU MIND COMING INTO *TOWN* IN THE MORNING?

I... I HOPE I FEEL *UP* TO IT, CONSTABLE STEBBINS. THIS... THIS HAS COME AS SUCH A *BLOW*...

CONSTABLE STEBBINS THEN PHONED THE COUNTY MORGUE AND MADE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE REMOVAL OF JOEL'S BODY...

IT'S THE *LAW*, MA'AM. THE BODY'S GOT TO BE *IMPOUNDED* UNTIL THE CORONER'S JURY BRINGS IN A *VERDICT!* BUT I'M NOT *WAITIN'* ON *THEM!* IT'S PRETTY *OBVIOUS* WHAT IT'LL BE...

I *UNDERSTAND*, CONSTABLE...

THE NEXT MORNING, I DRESSED IN BLACK AND WENT INTO TOWN TO THE CONSTABLE'S OFFICE. HE STARTED TO QUESTION ME...

DID YOUR HUSBAND HAVE ANY *ENEMIES*, MRS. THATCHER? ANYBODY WHO COULD HAVE CONCEIVABLY *COMMITTED* THIS CRIME?

NONE THAT I *KNOW* OF! EVERYBODY *LOVED* JOEL!

WELL THEN, DID *YOU*...UH... THAT IS...DID *YOU* HAVE ANY *MEN* FRIENDS WHO MIGHT HAVE WANTED YOUR HUSBAND OUT OF THE *WAY*?

CONSTABLE STEBBINS! HOW *DARE* YOU? I *LOVED* MY HUSBAND *DEARLY!*

CONSTABLE STEBBINS FLUSHED RED AT MY INDIGNATION, BUT HE CONTINUED TO EXPLORE THAT ANGLE...

I'M...I'M *SORRY*, MA'AM! I'M INVESTIGATING A *MURDER!* I'VE *GOT* TO ASK PERSONAL QUESTIONS! YOU...YOU SAY YOU *HAD NO LOVERS?*

NONE! ASK ANYONE IN *TOWN*...ANYONE! THE *VERY IDEA!* UNLESS... *UNLESS*... OH, *NO!*

AND THEN, AS AN AFTERTHOUGHT, I LET IT DROP... OH, SO CASUALLY... SO INNOCENTLY... KNOWING HE WOULD PICK UP THE SCENT AS A DOG SCENTS A RABBIT...
UNLESS WHAT, MA'AM?
WELL, SURELY THAT FOOLISH YOUNG MAN DIDN'T GET THE WRONG IDEA! OH, NO! HE COULDN'T HAVE! I MADE IT SO CLEAR!
MADE WHAT SO CLEAR, MA'AM? WHAT YOUNG MAN? TELL ME! IF IT'S ANY SLIM LEAD AT ALL...
WELL, IT WAS ALL SO HARMLESS! I NEVER ENCOURAGED HIM. HE ASSUMED THINGS...
HIS NAME IS HENRY DICKSON. HE'S A CLERK IN MY... SOB... MY POOR DEAR HUSBAND'S BANK. WHENEVER I CAME TO TOWN TO DO SOME SHOPPING, I WOULD STOP BY THE BANK AND HAVE LUNCH WITH JOEL.
'ONE DAY, JOEL WAS BUSY. HE BUZZED THIS HENRY DICKSON AND...'
HENRY! I'VE GOT AN APPOINTMENT IN FIFTEEN MINUTES. WOULD YOU BE A PAL AND TAKE MY WIFE OUT TO LUNCH FOR ME?
WHY, I'D BE DELIGHTED, MR. THATCHER! SHALL WE GO, MA'AM?
SEE YOU THIS EVENING, DEAR!
'HENRY WAS A STRANGE YOUNG MAN... THE KIND THAT SAID WHAT WAS ON HIS MIND... BLURTED IT OUT WITHOUT THINKING. AT LUNCH THAT DAY...'
YOU'RE TERRIBLY LOVELY, MRS. THATCHER. TOO LOVELY TO BE CHAINED TO AN OLDER MAN WHO CAN'T REALLY... ER... APPRECIATE YOUR CHARMS!
WHY, HENRY! YOU FLATTERER! WHAT MAKES YOU THINK JOEL DOESN'T APPRECIATE ME?
HE MIGHT APPRECIATE YOU AS HE VALUES HIS OTHER HOLDINGS, MRS. THATCHER. BUT DOES HE SHOW YOU WARMTH... AFFECTION... PASSION? CAN HE FULFILL YOUR DESIRES?
JOEL DOES VERY WELL, HENRY! NOW LET'S END THE DISCUSSION!
'HENRY MADE ME FEEL ATTRACTIVE AND YOUNG AND DESIRABLE AGAIN. I SEE THAT, NOW! BUT THAT'S THE ONLY REASON I LET HIM TAKE ME OUT TO LUNCH TIME AND TIME AGAIN. THERE WAS NEVER ANYTHING... I MEAN... OH, DEAR! I REMEMBER NOW! THAT TIME...'
I CAN SEE IT IN YOUR EYES, NAN. YOU FEEL YOU'RE WASTING YOUR LIFE WITH HIM. DIVORCE HIM! MARRY ME!
HENRY! PLEASE! YOU'RE VERY SWEET, BUT I LOVE MY HUSBAND! I HAVE EVERYTHING WITH HIM!

'...THAT TIME I REALIZED HENRY WAS IN LOVE WITH ME. I REMEMBER IT NOW. I DIDN'T WANT TO *HURT* HIM...AND YET I WANTED TO *END* THIS FOOLISHNESS...'

SURE YOU HAVE *EVERYTHING*... EVERYTHING THAT *MONEY* CAN BUY...EVERYTHING BUT *REAL TRUE HAPPINESS!* AND I COULD MAKE YOU *HAPPY*, NAN!

I COULD *NEVER* BE HAPPY ON A *BANK CLERK'S SALARY*, HENRY. I'M *USED TO* TOO MUCH!

'IT WAS A *TERRIBLE* THING TO SAY! I KNOW! I *WANTED* TO DISCOURAGE HIM. I *WANTED* TO INSULT HIM. I NEVER *THOUGHT* HE WOULD TAKE IT AS A *HINT*...'

BUT IF YOU *WERE RICH*... AND *FREE*...IF JOEL WERE *DEAD*...YOU'D *CONSIDER ME*, NAN?

STOP DREAMING, HENRY! JOEL IS *VERY MUCH ALIVE!* AND I'VE GOT TO BE *GOING!* THANK YOU FOR LUNCH! THIS IS THE *LAST TIME!* GOOD-BYE!

AS I FINISHED MY STORY, I LOOKED AT CONSTABLE STEBBINS WITH A HAUNTED, TROUBLED, BEWILDERED LOOK...

OH, *CONSTABLE!* YOU *DON'T* SUPPOSE THAT *POOR LOVE-SICK IDIOT* THOUGHT I *MEANT*... IF *HE*... OH, *LORD*...

LOOKS THAT WAY TO *ME*, MA'AM! *ANYWAY*, THERE'S *NO* HARM IN *PULLIN' HIM IN!*

CONSTABLE STEBBINS PICKED UP THE PHONE AS I BURST OUT CRYING...

ISSUE A *WARRANT* FOR *HENRY DICKSON* OVER AT THE *BANK*, ALVIN. HAVE HIM PICKED UP ON *SUSPICION OF MURDER!*

OH...SOB... SOB...WHAT HAVE I *DONE*... SOB...TO *HIM*... AND... SOB... TO *JOEL?*

AFTER HE HUNG UP, HE COMFORTED ME...

THERE, THERE, NOW, MRS. THATCHER! YOU *COULDN'T* HAVE KNOWN IT WASN'T *YOUR* FAULT THAT YOUNG NITWIT *MISINTERPRETED* PERFECTLY *INNOCENT REMARKS!*

I SHOULD HAVE STOPPED *SEEING* HIM IN THE *BEGINNING!* I WAS *VAIN* AND *SELFISH!* I...

THEN HIS FACE GREW GRIM. HE STARED DOWN AT ME...

BUT THAT'S ONLY *HALF* THE CASE, MA'AM! IF HENRY *SHOT* YOUR HUSBAND, *WHO THREW THE KNIFE?*

THREW...THE... KNIFE!? OH... DEAR!

AGAIN HIS EARS PRICKED UP...

LOOK, MA'AM. YOU'RE AN... AHEM...AN *ATTRACTIVE WOMAN*. YOU MUSTN'T BE *ASHAMED* OF *BEING SO*. IF THERE WAS *SOMEONE ELSE* LIKE HENRY...

WHEN YOU MENTIONED *'KNIFE-THROWING'*, I THOUGHT OF *GEORGE BAKERSFIELD*...

'GEORGE BAKERSFIELD WAS HIRED BY JOEL AS CARETAKER OF OUR SUMMER LODGE AT THE LAKE. I MET HIM THE WEEK I WENT UP THERE...'

A *HIKE?! ME?!* NOT ON YOUR *LIFE*, HONEY. I'M JUST GOING TO *LOLL* HERE! WHY DON'T YOU ASK *GEORGE?*

ALL RIGHT, JOEL, DEAR.

'GEORGE WAS THE OUTDOOR TYPE... SKILLED IN ALL SPORTS. HIS SPECIALTY WAS KNIFE-THROWING. I REMEMBER HOW, ON THAT FIRST HIKE, HE SHOWED ME HIS TALENTS...'

WHAT *UNCANNY AIM*, GEORGE! I SO ADMIRE *STRONG ATHLETIC* MEN!

THEN HOW CAN YOU *STAND* BEING MARRIED TO THAT FLABBY, INERT LUMP OF *LARD* YOU CALL YOUR *HUSBAND?*

'I WAS TERRIBLY INSULTED BY HIS REMARK. I TRIED TO TELL HIM THE TRUTH...THAT I LOVED JOEL... BUT HE GRABBED ME AND PULLED ME TO HIM...'

CAN HE GIVE YOU *THESE... STRONG ARMS...* A *WHIPCORD BODY...* THE *HUNGER* OF A *REAL MAN? CAN HE?*

LET ME *GO*, YOU *BEAST!*

'AND THEN HE KISSED ME. I SLAPPED HIS FACE AND RAN BACK TOWARD THE LODGE, INFURIATED...'

I *DESPISE* YOU... *LOATHE* YOU... *HATE* YOU!

WHAT DID THE WISE BARD WRITE? "THE *LADY* DOTH *PROTEST TOO MUCH!*"

'THE NEXT TIME I SAW GEORGE WAS WHEN HE CAME TO THE HOUSE ONE NIGHT WHILE JOEL WAS WORKING LATE AT THE BANK...'

NAN! I *HAD* TO SEE YOU! I'M IN *LOVE* WITH YOU! I CAN'T GET YOU OUT OF MY *MIND!* WHY GO ON *TORTURING* ME... AND YOURSELF? PLEASE... RUN *AWAY* WITH ME!

GEORGE! YOU'RE BEING *FOOLISH!* I'M *PERFECTLY HAPPY* WITH *JOEL!* I WOULDN'T *RUN AWAY* FROM ALL *THIS* FOR *ANYTHING!*

NOT EVEN IF YOU'D FALLEN IN *LOVE* WITH ME?

NOT EVEN IF I'D FALLEN IN *LOVE* WITH YOU! NOW, *PLEASE GO!*

'I *MEANT* THAT... THAT I *HADN'T* FALLEN IN LOVE WITH GEORGE. BUT I *THINK* NOW THAT HE TOOK IT AS A *CONFESSION*. I *REMEMBER* NOW WHAT HE *SAID...*'

I'LL GO... BUT YOU'LL BE ABLE TO *DO* WHAT YOU WANT SOON! I *PROMISE!*

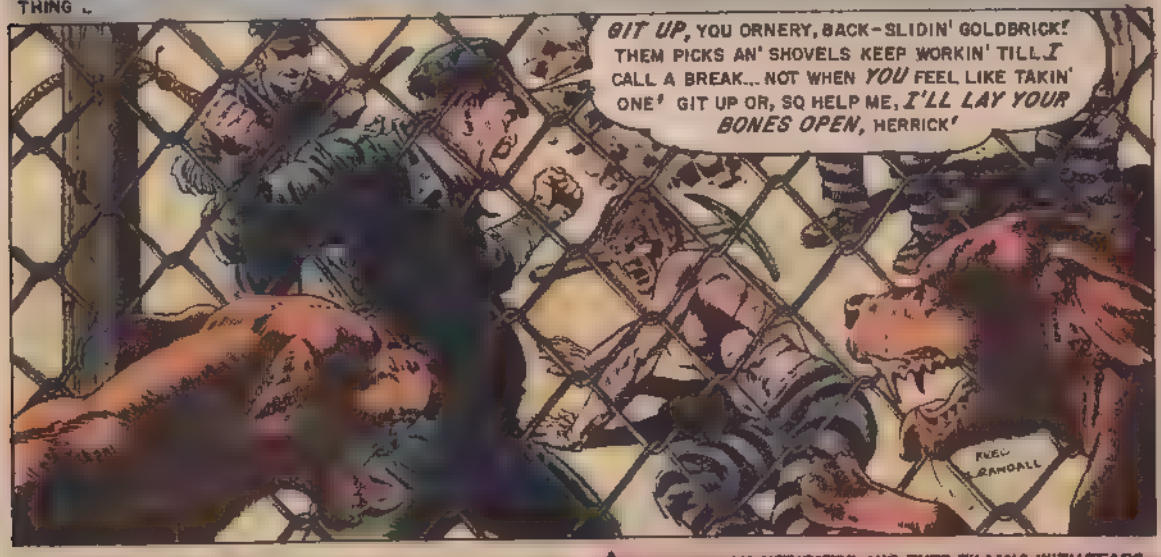
ALL I WANT NOW IS TO BE *LEFT ALONE...*

CONSTABLE STEBBINS SHOOK HIS HEAD AS I FINISHED MY STORY...
A MAN THINKS WHAT HE WANTS T' THINK, MA'AM! THIS GEORGE FELLER WANTED TO THINK YOU LOVED HIM, BUT WOULDN'T GIVE UP YOUR WEALTH!
I...SOB... I DIDN'T KNOW! I WOULD HAVE MADE IT SO PLAIN TO HIM!
AGAIN CONSTABLE STEBBINS PICKED UP THE PHONE...
ALVIN! ISSUE A WARRANT FOR A GEORGE BAKERSFIELD...SUSPICION OF MURDER!
SOB... SOB...
AND AGAIN HE COMFORTED ME...
POOR KID! TWO DARN FOOL MEN FALL FOR YOU.. GET A CRAZY NOTION THAT YOU'RE UNHAPPY WITH YOUR HUSBAND... AND TAKE IT INTO THEIR HANDS TO KILL 'IM AND FREE YOU! WELL, WE'LL MAKE 'EM PAY FOR IT, MRS. THATCHER! WE'LL...
IT WON'T BRING JOEL BACK... SOB...
THEY BROUGHT IN GEORGE BAKERSFIELD AND HENRY DICKSON AND PUT THEM IN SEPARATE ROOMS...
GOT AN ALIBI FOR YOUR WHEREABOUTS AT 10:12 LAST NIGHT, DICKSON?
WHAT'D YOU DO WITH THE GUN, DICKSON? THE GUN YOU KILLED JOEL THATCHER WITH?
YOU'RE CRAZY! I DIDN'T KILL ANYBODY!
THEY GRILLED EACH OF THEM FOR HOURS...
WE GOT CASTS OF THE FOOTPRINTS OUTSIDE THE THATCHER WINDOW, BAKERSFIELD! SOMEBODY UP AT THE LAKE IDENTIFIED YOUR KNIFE! YOU KILLED HIM, DIDN'T YOU?
SOMEBODY ELSE WAS THERE BESIDE ME! I HEARD A SHOT AS I THREW THE KNIFE! I'M NOT THE ONLY GUILTY ONE!
THAT DOES IT, CHIEF! C'MON, BAKERSFIELD!
BAKERSFIELD SAID HE SAW YOU RUNNING AWAY, DICKSON! HE SAID YOU DID THE SHOOTING!
ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! I SHOT HIM! BUT BAKERSFIELD THREW THE KNIFE! WHO'S TO SAY WHICH KILLED HIM?
THAT'S FOR THE CORONER'S JURY TO DECIDE. ONE OF YOU TRIED TO KILL A DEAD MAN! A SPLIT-SECOND DIFFERENCE, BUT STILL, A DEAD MAN! ONE OF YOU IS GUILTY OF MURDER! THE OTHER OF THE ATTEMPT!
OKAY, DICKSON! LET'S GO! WE'VE GOT A CELL WAITING!

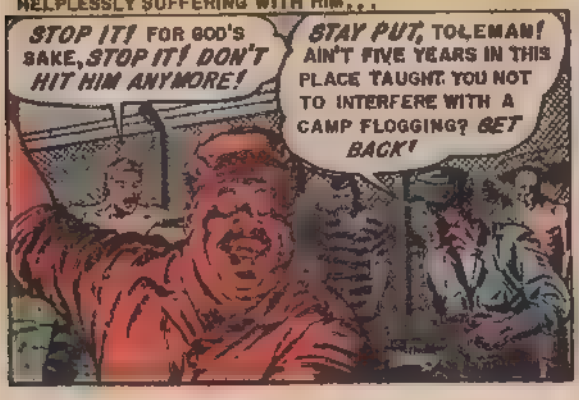
CONSTABLE STEBBINS TOLD ME THE NEWS...
YOU CAN GO ON HOME NOW, MRS. THATCHER! THEY EACH CONFESSED! IT'S A TECHNICAL QUESTION FROM HERE ON IN...
TECHNICAL? I DON'T UNDERSTAND!
WELL, WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO PERFORM AN AUTOPSY ON YOUR HUSBAND'S BODY TO DETERMINE WHICH ACTUALLY KILLED HIM... THE KNIFE OR THE BULLET!
OH! I SEE!
I WAS SICK WHEN I GOT HOME. ALL NIGHT, I TOSSED AND TURNED UNABLE TO SLEEP. EARLY IN THE MORNING, THE PHONE STARTLED ME OUT OF AN EXHAUSTED DOZE...
H-HELLO?
MRS. THATCHER? THAT AUTOPSY WON'T BE NECESSARY NOW! YOU KNOW... IT'S AMAZING! BOTH THOSE GUYS GOT THE SAME IDEA... TO KILL YOUR HUSBAND... AND THEY DID IT AT THE SAME TIME...
I COULDN'T BELIEVE MY EARS...
LAST NIGHT, BOTH THOSE GUYS COMMITTED SUICIDE IN THEIR CELLS. GUESS THEY COULDN'T FACE THE MUSIC. WELL, 'BYE, MRS. THATCHER!
'BYE... CONSTABLE!
I FELT SUDDENLY REFRESHED. I GOT UP AND SLIPPED INTO A HOUSECOAT AND WALKED OUT TO THE PORCH-STUDY. I LOOKED AT THE CHARRED REMAINS OF THE LETTER I'D BURNED LAST NIGHT... THE SUICIDE LETTER IN JOEL'S HANDWRITING...
IT HAD GOTTEN TO A POINT WHERE I'D LOST PATIENCE. FIRST, HENRY'D BALKED! THEN GEORGE! I HADN'T BEEN ABLE TO BRING EITHER OF THEM TO KILL JOEL! SO I'D DECIDED TO DO IT MYSELF! I'D FORGED THAT LETTER...
JOEL WAS DEAD WHEN HENRY SHOT HIM AND GEORGE KNIFED HIM. YOU SEE, I'D POISONED HIM A FEW HOURS EARLIER!
8

DOG FOOD

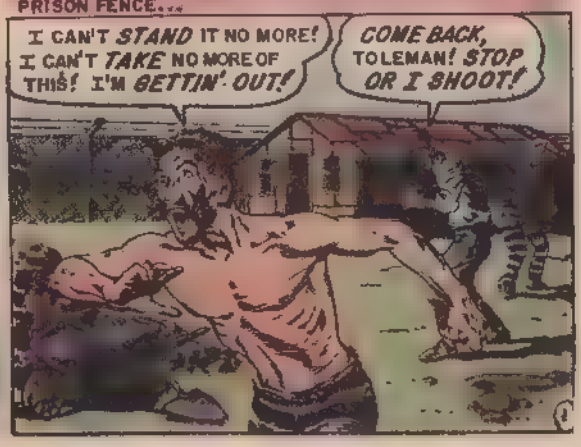
LESTER HOAG RULED OVER HIS PRISON CAMP WITH AN IRON FIST AND A LEATHER WHIP AND A COMPELLING DESIRE TO INFLICT PAIN UPON THE LIFERS WHO WERE HIS CHARGES. AND NO ONE HAD EVER ESCAPED FROM LESTER HOAG'S INTOLERABLE DOMAIN. SOME HAD TRIED, BUT NONE HAD SURVIVED THE FIERCE GANTLET BETWEEN THE COMPOUND'S OUTER AND INNER FENCES WHERE FEROCIOUS SEMI-STARVED DOGS WAITED WITH SALIVA DRIPPING FROM THEIR BLOODTHIRSTY JAWS...WAITED FOR THE DESPERATE ONES...THE ONES WHO WOULD FINALLY BREAK UNDER THE STRAIN OF LESTER HOAG'S CURSES AND SCREAMS AND THE STINGS OF HIS WHIP AND THE BRUISES OF HIS HOBNAILED BOOTS...WAITED FOR THOSE WHO WOULD NO LONGER CARE...TO WHOM FREEDOM AND DEATH WOULD EVENTUALLY COME TO MEAN ONE AND THE SAME THING ..


GIT UP, YOU ORNERY, BACK-SLIDIN' GOLDBRICK! THEM PICKS AN' SHOVELS KEEP WORKIN' TILL I CALL A BREAK... NOT WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE TAKIN' ONE! GIT UP OR, SO HELP ME, I'LL LAY YOUR BONES OPEN, HERRICK!
REG RANDALL

TOM HERRICK WRITHED BENEATH THE BESTIAL ONSLAUGHT OF LESTER HOAG'S WHISTLING LASH, RECOILING IN PAIN WITH EACH STINGING BLOW THAT TRACED AN ANGRY RED LINE ACROSS HIS PERSPIRED BARED BACK. HIS FELLOW PRISONERS STOOD BY, HELPLESSLY WATCHING, HELPLESSLY SUFFERING WITH HIM...


STOP IT! FOR GOD'S SAKE, STOP IT! DON'T HIT HIM ANYMORE!
STAY PUT, TOLEMAN! AIN'T FIVE YEARS IN THIS PLACE TAUGHT YOU NOT TO INTERFERE WITH A CAMP FLOGGING? GET BACK!

ANDY TOLEMAN HESITATED, HIS EYES FILLING WITH TEARS, STARING AT THE TWITCHING BODY OF HIS PRISON PAL. THEN, SUDDENLY, HE DARTED TOWARD THE BARBED-WIRE PRISON FENCE...



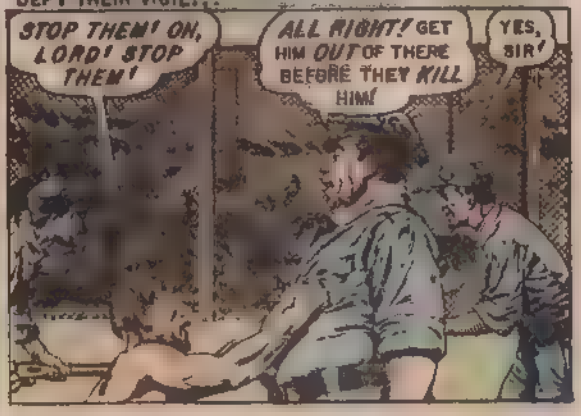
ONE OF THE GRIMY PRISON GUARDS RAISED HIS RIFLE. HOAG STEPPED FORWARD, GRINNING, PUTTING HIS HUGE FIST UPON THE BARREL...

THE BLOODY, BEATEN PRISONER RAISED HIMSELF, CRYING WEAKLY TO HIS FLEEING COMPANION...

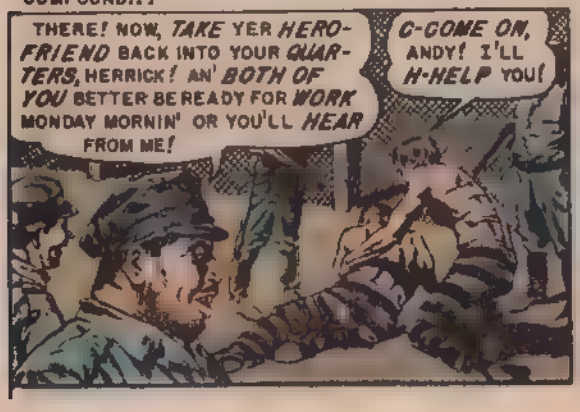
THE SNARLING HOUNDS LEAPED DOWN THE NARROW AISLE BETWEEN THE INNER AND OUTER BARBED-WIRE FENCES TO WHERE THE ESCAPING PRISONER STOOD, ROOTED WITH FEAR...

THE PRISON CAMP ECHOED WITH ANDY'S TERRIFIED SCREAMS AND THE BLOOD-INFURIATED HOWLS OF THE HUNGER-CRAZED HOUNDS AS THEY LEAPED UPON THE UNFORTUNATE ESCAPEE.. RIPPING... SLASHING... TEARING..

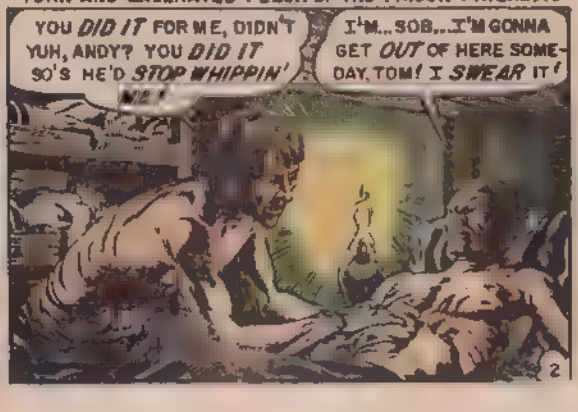
AND LESTER HOAG WATCHED WITH AN EVIL SATISFACTION AS THE RAZOR SHARP FANGS OF HIS STARVED BEASTS TORE AT THE SHRIEKING PRISONER WHO HAD ATTEMPTED TO DEFY THEIR VIGIL...



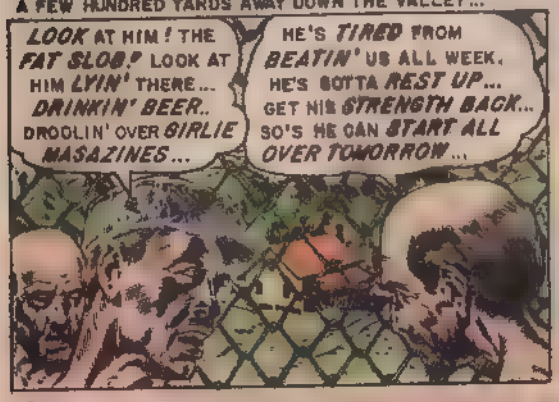
SOMEHOW, THE GUARDS MANAGED TO BEAT OFF THE YAPPING HOUNDS AND DRAG THE LACERATED AND BLEEDING BODY OF ANDY TOLEMAN BACK INSIDE THE COMPOUND...


THERE! NOW, TAKE YER HERO-FRIEND BACK INTO YOUR QUARTERS, HERRICK! AN' BOTH OF YOU BETTER BE READY FOR WORK MONDAY MORNIN' OR YOU'LL HEAR FROM ME!
C-COME ON, ANDY! I'LL H-HELP YOU!

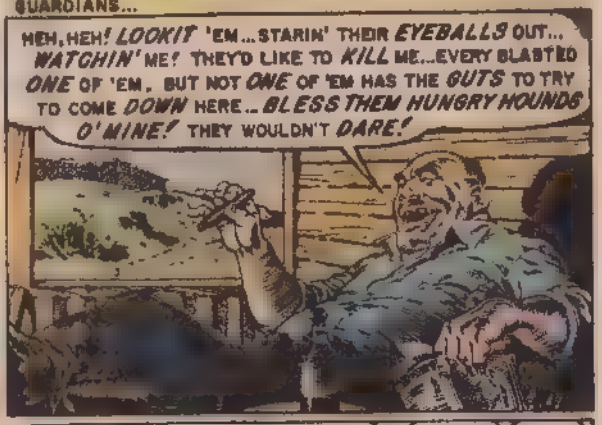
THAT NIGHT, BY THE LIGHT OF A FLICKERING CANDLE, TOM HERRICK BATHED ANDY TOLEMAN'S WOUNDS... TOUCHING A DAMPENED CLOTH TO THE UGLY FLOWING GASHES... THE TORN AND LACERATED FLESH OF HIS PRISON-FRIEND...



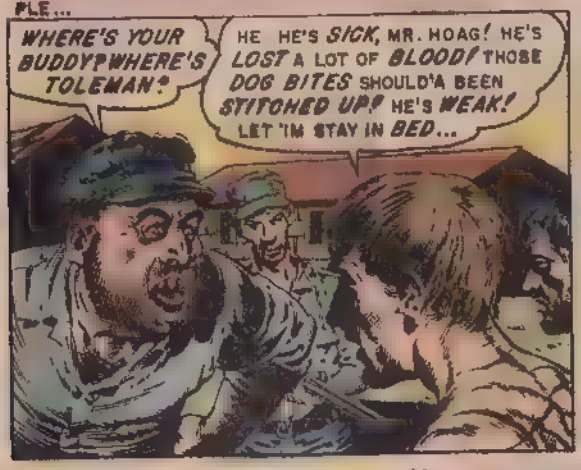
THE NEXT DAY WAS SUNDAY, LESTER HOAG'S DAY OFF. BUT THE TENSE CLOUD OF HATRED THAT LAY LIKE A BLANKET OVER THE CAMP WAS HARDLY DISPERSED, FOR HOAG RELAXED, IN FULL VIEW, IN FRONT OF HIS HOUSE A FEW HUNDRED YARDS AWAY DOWN THE VALLEY...


LOOK AT HIM! THE FAT SLOB! LOOK AT HIM LYIN' THERE... DRINKIN' BEER.. DROOLIN' OVER GIRLIE MASAZINES...
HE'S TIRED FROM BEATIN' US ALL WEEK. HE'S GOTTA REST UP... GET HIS STRENGTH BACK... SO'S HE CAN START ALL OVER TOMORROW...

THE PRISON DICTATOR WAS OBLIVIOUS TO THE NAKED FURY MOUNTING IN THE CAMP UP THE HILLSIDE. HE WAS SAFE, AND A PACK OF STARVED, BLOOD-THIRSTY HOUNDS WERE HIS GUARDIANS...

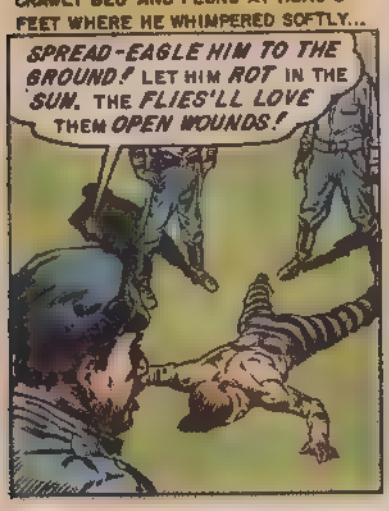

HEH, HEH! LOOKIT 'EM... STARIN' THEIR EYEBALLS OUT... WATCHIN' ME! THEY'D LIKE TO KILL ME... EVERY BLASTED ONE OF 'EM. BUT NOT ONE OF 'EM HAS THE GUTS TO TRY TO COME DOWN HERE... BLESS THEM HUNGRY HOUNDS O'MINE! THEY WOULDN'T DARE!

AT SHACKLING TIME THE NEXT MORNING, ANDY WAS MISSING FROM THE LINE-UP. HOAG'S FACE TURNED PURPLE...

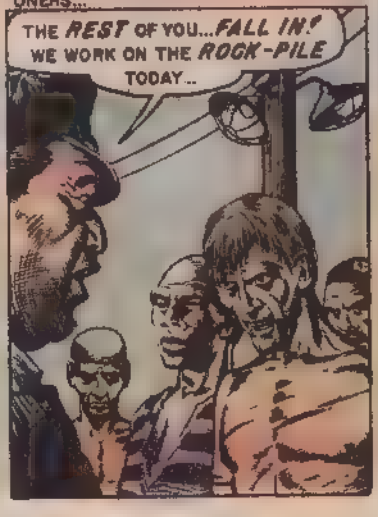

WHERE'S YOUR BUDDY? WHERE'S TOLEMAN?
HE HE'S SICK, MR. HOAG! HE'S LOST A LOT OF BLOOD! THOSE DOG BITES SHOULD'A BEEN STITCHED UP! HE'S WEAK! LET 'IM STAY IN BED...

STAY IN BED?! NOBODY STAYS IN BED! IF HE'S ALIVE, HE WORKS! WILSON... WALKER. DRAG THAT TOLEMAN OUT HERE! SICK, IS HE?! WE'LL SEE HOW SICK HE'LL BE WHEN I GET THROUGH WITH HIM...
YES, SIR! C'MON, WILSON!
LET'S GO!

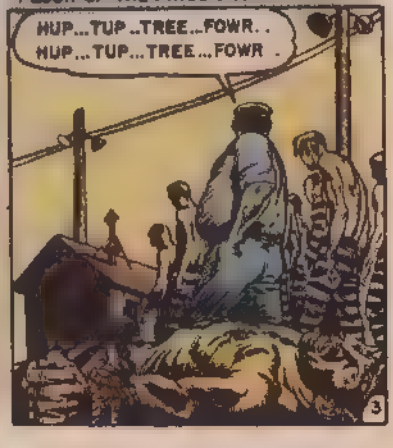
ANDY WAS DRAGGED FROM HIS CRAWLY BED AND FLUNG AT HOAG'S FEET WHERE HE WHIMPERED SOFTLY...



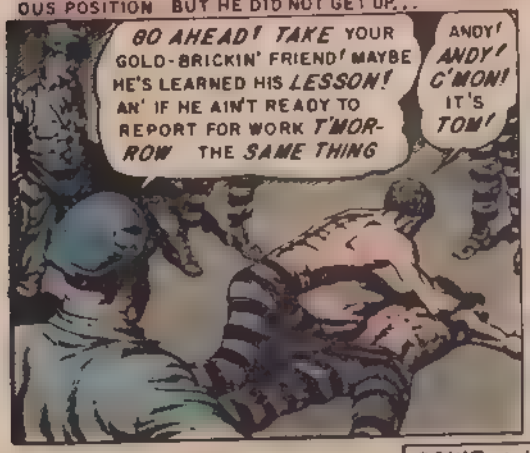
HOAG TURNED TO THE OTHER PRISONERS...



AND AS TOM AND OTHER SICK AND WEAK AND HALF-DEAD PRISONERS MARCHED OFF, ANDY WAS LASHED SPREAD-EAGLED TO THE HOT, DUSTY FLOOR OF THE PRISON COMPOUND...

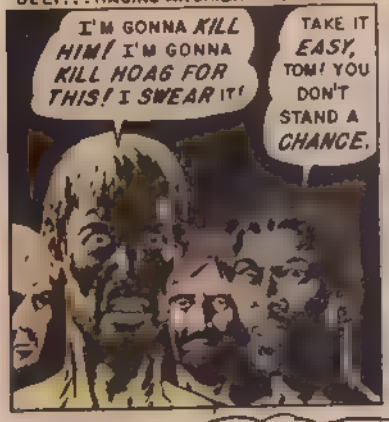


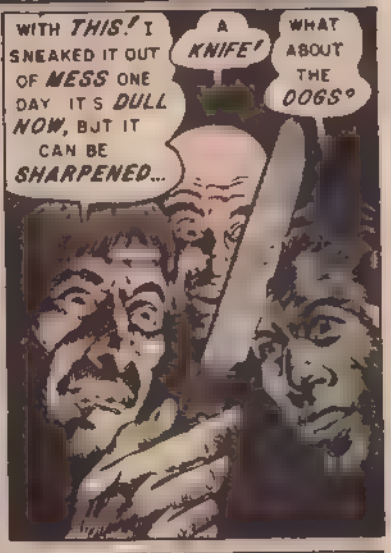
THAT EVENING, WHEN THE MEN RETURNED TO THE COMPOUND, ANDY WAS RELEASED FROM HIS TORTUROUS POSITION BUT HE DID NOT GET UP...


GO AHEAD! TAKE YOUR GOLD-BRICKIN' FRIEND! MAYBE HE'S LEARNED HIS LESSON! AN' IF HE AIN'T READY TO REPORT FOR WORK T'MORROW THE SAME THING
ANDY! ANDY! C'MON! IT'S TOM!

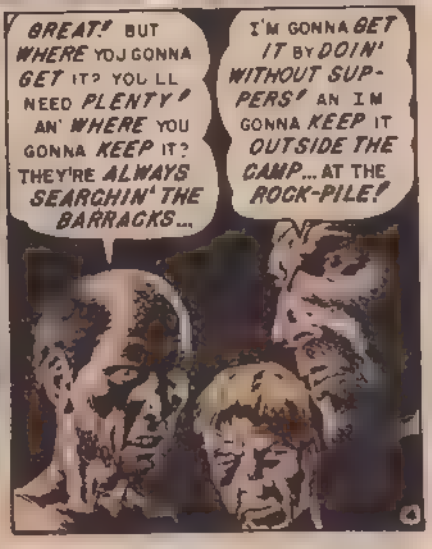
THEY CARRIED ANDY INTO THE PRISON BARRACKS AND LAID HIM ON H S BLOODSTAINED COT HE OPENED HIS EYES JUST ONCE SAID JUST ONE THING BEFORE HE DIED...

TOM HERRICK LOOKED AT THE DEAD BODY OF HIS FRIEND AND A STORM BREWED WITHIN HIM...A STORM THAT CAME UP FROM SOMEWHERE DEEP...RAGING ANGRIER AND ANGRIER.



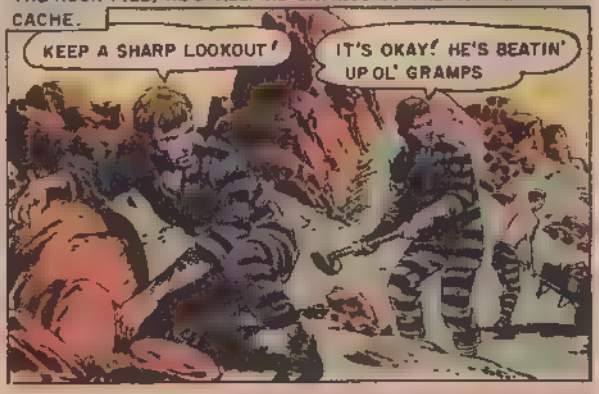


THE WAY I FIGURE IT, THEM HOUNDS COULD BE TAKEN CARE OF IF I HAD ENOUGH MEAT...
'I COULD KEEP 'EM AWAY FROM ME BY TOSSIN' IT TO 'EM AS I MADE THE RUN TO HOAG'S HOUSE'

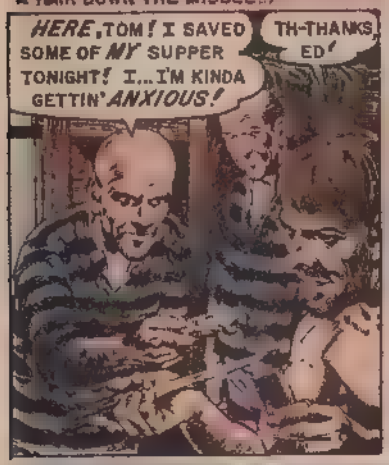

GREAT! BUT WHERE YOU GONNA GET IT? YOU'LL NEED PLENTY! AN' WHERE YOU GONNA KEEP IT? THEY'RE ALWAYS SEARCHIN' THE BARRACKS...
I'M GONNA GET IT BY DOIN' WITHOUT SUPPERS! AN I'M GONNA KEEP IT OUTSIDE THE CAMP... AT THE ROCK-PILE!

AND SO, 'OPERATION REVENGE' BEGAN FOR TOM HERRICK. HE WASN'T INTERESTED IN ESCAPING FROM THE PRISON NOW. THAT COULD COME ALONG LATER AS AN AFTER-THOUGHT IF HIS PLAN WORKED. ONLY ONE THING OCCUPIED TOM'S MIND. *'KILL HOAG...FOR ANDY.'*

LITTLE BY LITTLE, DAY AFTER DAY, WEEK AFTER WEEK, TOM SAVED THE MEAGER SCRAPS OF MEAT FROM HIS SUPPER PLATES, STUFFING THEM INTO A CLOTH BAG HE'D SEWN BENEATH HIS SHIRT. AND ON THE DAYS WHEN THEY'D WORK THE ROCK PILE, HE'D ADD HIS SAVINGS TO THE REST OF HIS CACHE.



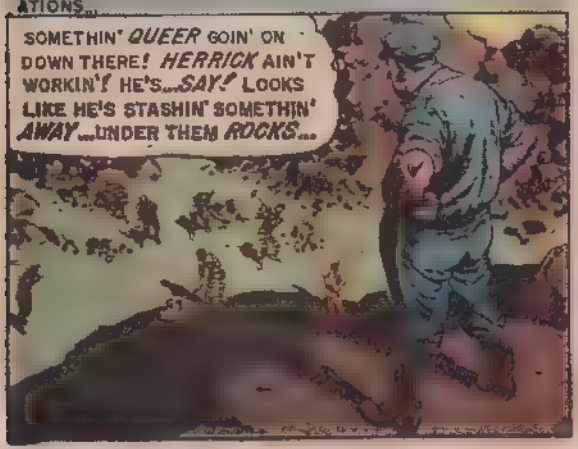
DURING THE LONG NIGHTS, HE'D HONE AND REHONE THE ONCE-DULL MESS KNIFE TILL IT COULD ALMOST SPLIT A HAIR DOWN THE MIDDLE...



SOON, 'OPERATION REVENGE' WASN'T ONLY TOM'S BATTLE. EVERY-ONE IN THE CAMP HAD A STAKE IN IT...

AND THE CACHE GREW...

FROM HIS VANTAGE POINT WITH THE SUN BEHIND HIM, LESTER HOAG WATCHED THE PRISONERS' FURTIVE OPER-ATIONS...

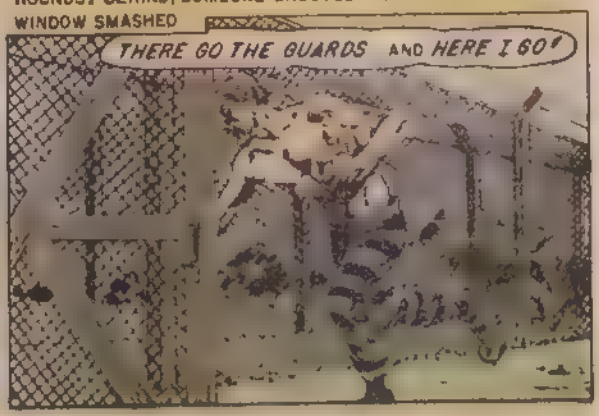


WHEN THE PRISONERS WERE RETURNED, THE WORD WAS PASSED ALONG

SAVE *ALL* YER MEAT!
SAVE *ALL YOU GET! HERRICK GOES TONIGHT!*
HE'LL NEED ENOUGH TO GET *PAST* THE *GANTLET* TILL HE CAN REACH THE *BIG CATCH* AT THE *ROCK PILE!*

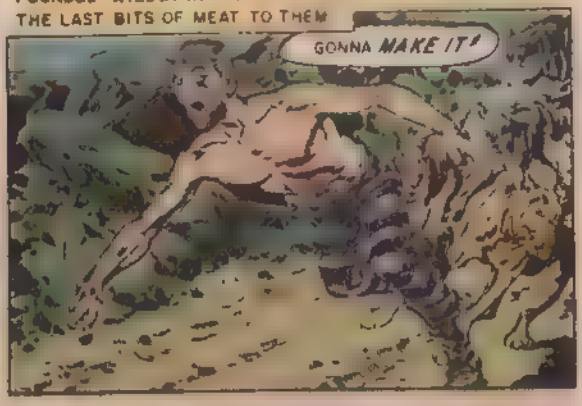
A GHOSTLY COLD MOON HUNG IN A VELVET BLACK SKY AS TOM SLIPPED FROM THE PRISON BARRACKS OUT INTO THE DESERTED COMPOUND. . .

HE RAN LOW, HIDING THE GLINT OF HIS KNIFE. FROM THE GANTLET CAME THE SLOBBERING BARKING OF THE STARVED HOUNDS. BEHIND, SOMEONE SHOUTED AND A BARRACKS WINDOW SMASHED



THE DOGS LOPED TOWARD HIM, HOWLING. HE FLUNG SOME OF THE PRECIOUS MEAT AND THEY LEAPED UPON IT, SNARLING AND FIGHTING AMONG THEMSELVES. . .

THE DOGS WERE AFTER HIM AS HE FLUNG OPEN THE OUTER GATE AND DARTED DOWN THE ROAD TOWARD THE ROCK PILE. ICE COLD SWEAT RAN DOWN HIS BACK, HIS HEART POUNDED WILDLY IN HIS HEAVING CHEST. HE FLUNG THE LAST BITS OF MEAT TO THEM



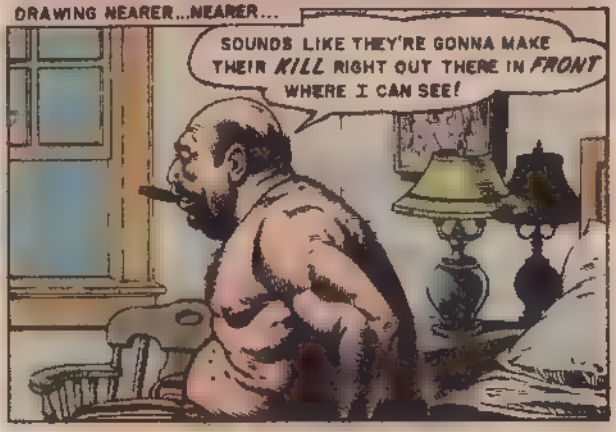
. . . AND CLAWED AT HIS MEAT CACHE'S HIDING PLACE

SAFE IN HIS SOFT BED IN HIS VALLEY HOUSE FAR BELOW, LESTER HOAG SAT UP, LISTENING TO THE HOWLING DOGS. AND HE LAUGHED

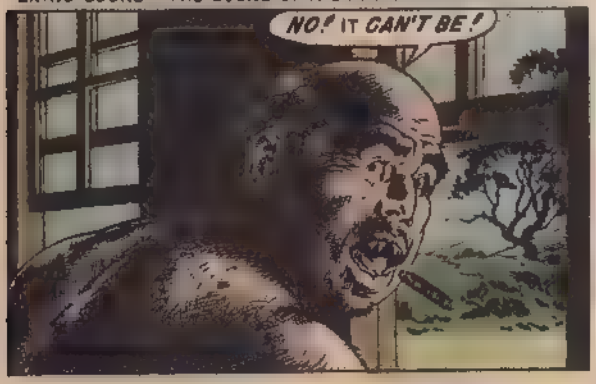
AT THE ROCK PILE, TOM HERRICK DISCOVERED WHY! THE MEAT WAS

HOAG LEANED BACK IN HIS BED, LIT HIS CIGAR, AND PUFFED ON IT CONTENTEDLY. HE *KNEW* WHAT WAS *HAPPENING!* HE COULD *SEE* IT IN HIS *MIND'S EYE*. HE'D *FIGURED THE WHOLE THING OUT!* AFTER THE PRISONERS HAD BEEN MARCHED BACK, HE'D *FOUND* THE CACHE OF MEAT AND *REMOVED IT*...

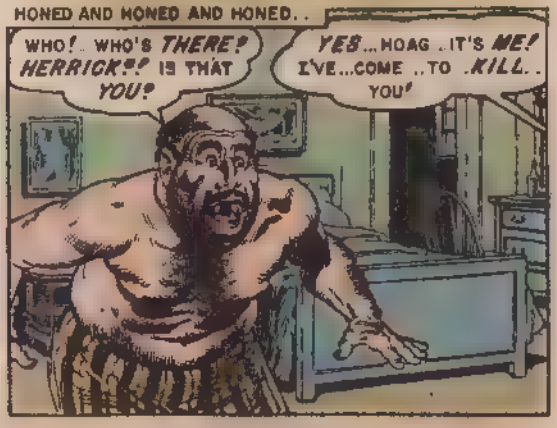
HOAG WAITED FOR THE EAR-SPLITTING SCREAMS... THE GURGLING DEATH CRY! BUT NO CRIES CAME! ONLY THE HOWLING SNARLING YELPS OF THE STARVED DOGS DRIFTED TO HIM... DRAWING NEARER...NEARER...



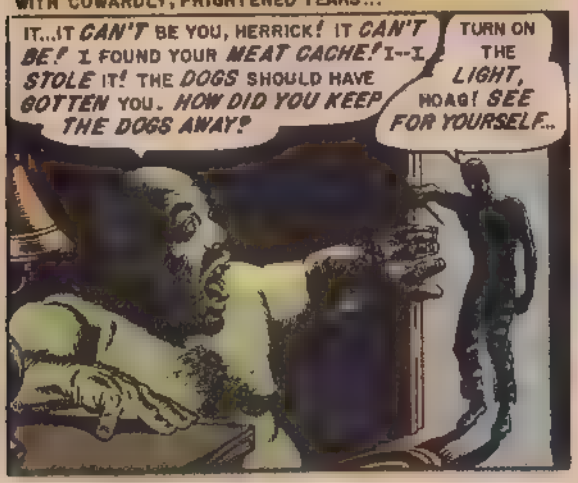
HOAG PEERED THROUGH HIS BEDROOM WINDOW, FLIPPING OFF THE LIGHT SO HE COULD SEE INTO THE MOONLIT DARKNESS. THE HOWLS OF THE DOGS WERE CLOSER NOW. BUT SUDDENLY THERE WAS ANOTHER SOUND. A MORE FRIGHTENING SOUND THE SOUND OF A DOOR SLAMMING...



HE HEARD THE FOOTSTEPS ON THE STAIRS, HEARD THE HEAVY BREATHING IN THE HALL OUTSIDE, SAW THE GLINT OF THE STEEL KNIFE THAT HAD BEEN PATIENTLY HONED AND HONED AND HONED..



TOM HERRICK STOOD SILHOUETTED IN THE BEDROOM DOORWAY. HOAG BACKED UP... HIS FLABBY FACE TWITCHING IN FEAR...HIS THICK LIPS SUDDENLY DRY...HIS EYES FILLING WITH COWARDLY, FRIGHTENED TEARS...


IT...IT *CAN'T* BE YOU, HERRICK! IT *CAN'T BE!* I FOUND YOUR *MEAT CACHE!* I--I *STOLE* IT! THE *DOGS* SHOULD HAVE *GOTTEN* YOU. *HOW DID YOU KEEP THE DOGS AWAY?*
TURN ON THE *LIGHT*, HOAG! *SEE FOR YOURSELF*...

HOAG REACHED OUT WITH A TREMBLING HAND AND FLICKED ON THE BEDROOM LIGHT. SUDDENLY HE WAS SICK. THE KNIFE IN HERRICK'S HAND WOULD BE A WELCOME END TO THE REVOLTING HORROR THAT BOILED AND TURNED HIS STOMACH IN DISGUST...

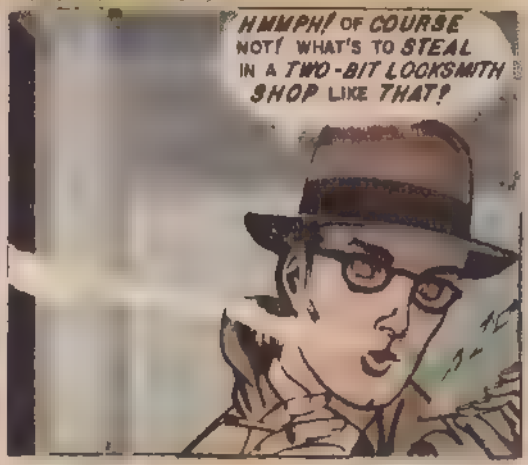
AND AS HERRICK CAME TOWARD HIM, HOAG TURNED FROM THE AWFUL SIGHT OF WHITE BONE SHOWING THROUGH RAW RED FLESH WHERE HERRICK HAD STRIPPED MEAT TO FEED THE HOWLING HUNGRY HOUNDS...

-THE END-

KEY CHAIN

UNGER HESITATED BEFORE THE LITTLE HOLE-IN-THE-WALL SHOP. HE SHOOK HIS HEAD. IT WAS THE OLDEST TRICK IN THE WORLD. NO LOCKSMITH WOULD FALL FOR IT. HE KNEW IT. HE KNEW HE'D HAVE TO FIND SOME OTHER WAY TO HAVE A DUPLICATE MADE OF THE SOFT LEAD KEY HE HELD IN HIS TREMBLING HAND...

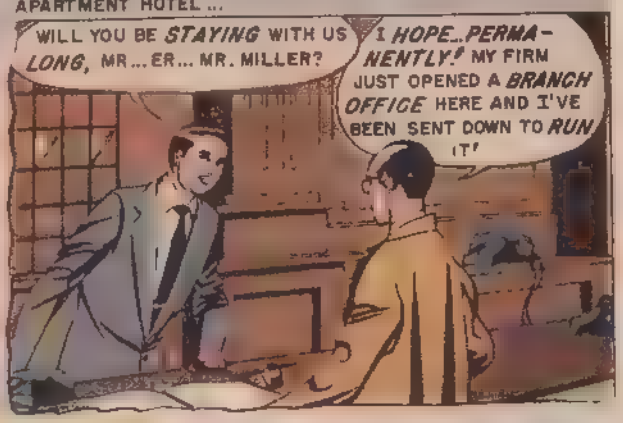
UNGER PUT THE LEAD KEY BACK INTO HIS POCKET AND LIT A CIGARETTE. HE STUDIED THE LOCKSMITH SHOP. IT WAS ONE OF THOSE LITTLE CUBICLE-TYPE STORES THAT NESTLED SNUGLY BETWEEN TWO LARGER ONES AS IF SEEKING THEIR PROTECTION AND WARMTH. HIS TRAINED EYES NOTED THE FRONT DOOR... NOTED NO BURGLAR ALARM METAL DECORATIONS ON THE GLASS...



HE GLANCED AT THE LOCKSMITH STANDING IN THE FRONT WINDOW, BUSY AT HIS KEYMAKING MACHINE... THE MACHINE UNGER NEEDED SO DESPERATELY TO USE

HIS GAZE FELL UPON THE BOARD OF KEY BLANKS HANGING BEH ND THE LOCKSM TH. SOMEWHERE ON THAT BOARD WAS THE BLANK THAT UNGER WOULD USE TO REPRODUCE A STURDY DUPLICATE OF THE USELESS LEAD CAST IN HIS POCKET..

AND THE LEAD KEY *WAS* USELESS IN ITS *PRESENT* FORM. IF UNGER WOULD TRY TO *USE* IT, IT WOULD *BEND* AND *SNAP* AND *SPOIL* HIS WEEKS OF *PLANNING*...HIS WEEKS OF *PATIENT WAITING*...WAITING FOR HIS *CHANCE*. HE REMEMBERED HOW HE'D CHECKED *IN* AT THE LUXURIOUS APARTMENT HOTEL ...


WILL YOU BE *STAYING* WITH US *LONG*, MR...ER... MR. MILLER?
I *HOPE*...*PERMANENTLY*! MY FIRM JUST OPENED A *BRANCH OFFICE* HERE AND I'VE BEEN SENT DOWN TO *RUN* IT!

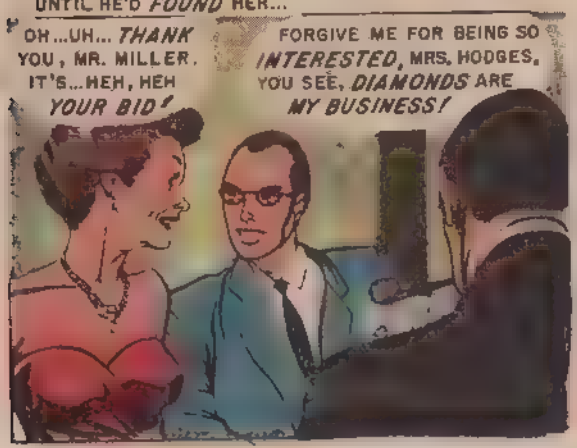
HE'D TAKEN HIS *LAST THOUSAND DOLLARS* AND HE'D MADE AN *INVESTMENT* WITH IT HE'D BOUGHT *RESPECTABILITY* WITH IT

ER AH HELLO! MY NAME IS *MILLER*! *JOHN* MILLER. I'VE JUST MOVED IN! WE'RE HEH...HEH. *NEIGHBORS*, YOU MIGHT SAY!
WELL, COME *IN*, MR MILLER! HOW ABOUT A *DRINK*?

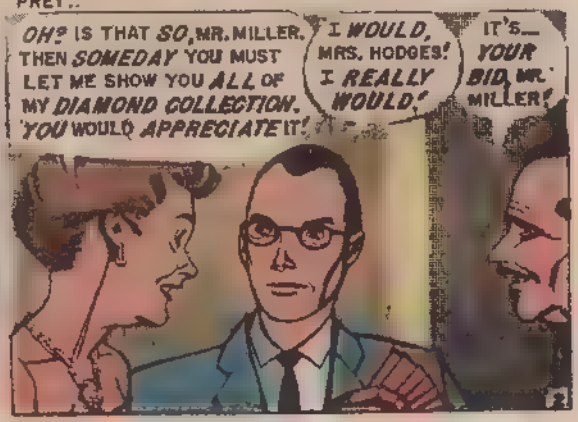
HE'D DRESSED IN CONSERVATIVE CLOTHES AND HE'D LED A CONSERVATIVE LIFE. FOR THREE WEEKS HE'D COME AND GONE IN THAT HOTEL AS A RESPECTABLE BUSINESS MAN..

AND FOR *THREE WEEKS* UNGER'D CASED THE JOINT...SEARCHING FOR HIS *PREY*, SEARCHING FOR HIS *MARK*.

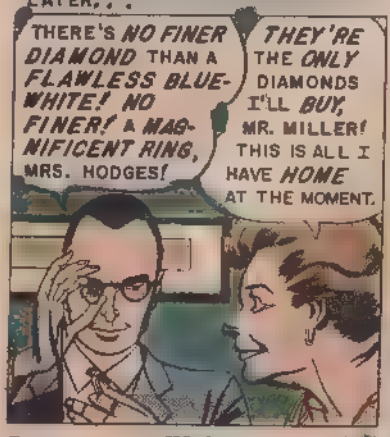
UNTIL HE'D *FOUND* HER...

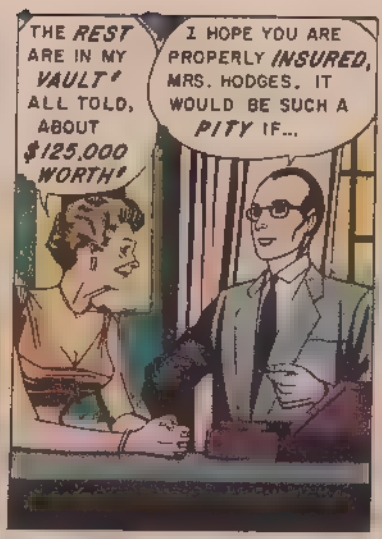

OH...UH... *THANK* YOU, MR. MILLER. IT'S...HEH, HEH *YOUR BID*!
FORGIVE ME FOR BEING SO *INTERESTED*, MRS. HODGES, YOU SEE, *DIAMONDS* ARE *MY BUSINESS*!

...AND HE'D FOUND HER AN *EAGER* AND *WILLING* PREY..

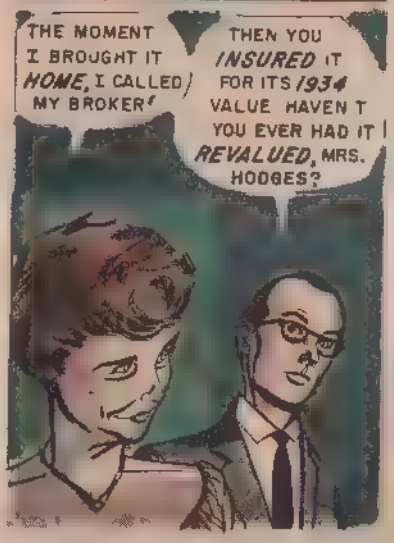

OH? IS THAT *SO*, MR. MILLER. THEN *SOMEDAY* YOU MUST LET ME SHOW YOU *ALL* OF MY *DIAMOND COLLECTION*. *YOU* WOULD *APPRECIATE* IT!
I *WOULD*, MRS. HODGES! I *REALLY WOULD*!
IT'S... *YOUR BID*, MR. MILLER!

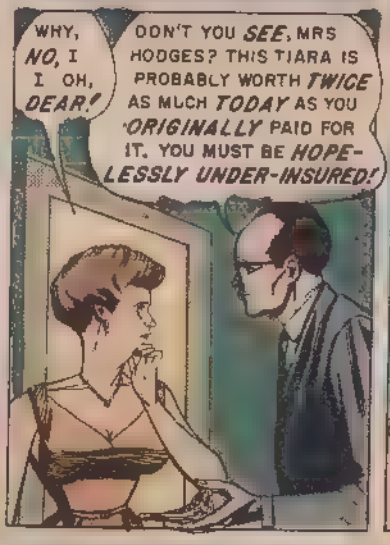
MR HODGES'D BEEN *WRONG!* UNGER'D ALREADY *MADE* HIS BID! AND MRS. HODGES HAD *ANSWERED.* LATER, . .

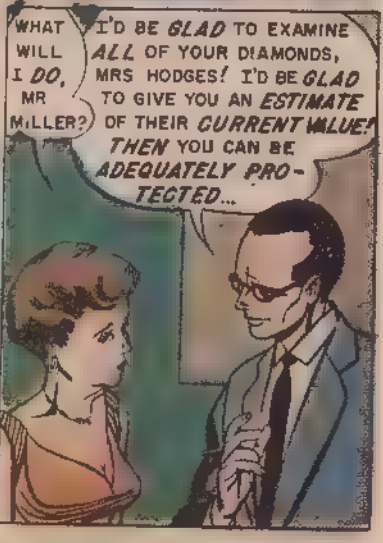

THERE'S *NO FINER DIAMOND* THAN A *FLAWLESS BLUE-WHITE! NO FINER!* A *MAGNIFICENT RING,* MRS. HODGES!
THEY'RE THE *ONLY* DIAMONDS I'LL *BUY,* MR. MILLER! THIS IS ALL I HAVE *HOME* AT THE MOMENT.

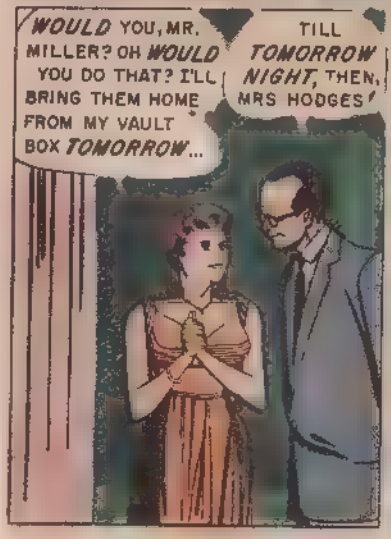


I HAVE POLICIES ON *ALL* MY JEWELRY, MR. MILLER. HAVE *NO FEAR!*
YOU SAY YOU *BOUGHT* THIS TIARA IN *1934,* MRS. HODGES? *DID* YOU INSURE IT *THEN?*


THE MOMENT I BROUGHT IT *HOME,* I CALLED MY BROKER!
THEN YOU *INSURED* IT FOR ITS *1934* VALUE HAVEN T YOU EVER HAD IT *REVALUED,* MRS. HODGES?

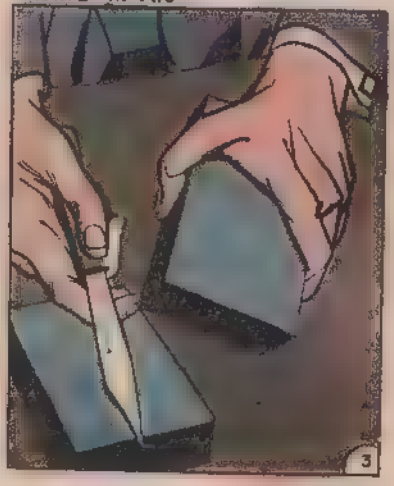

WHY, *NO,* I I OH, *DEAR!*
DON'T YOU *SEE,* MRS HODGES? THIS TIARA IS PROBABLY WORTH *TWICE* AS MUCH *TODAY* AS YOU *ORIGINALLY* PAID FOR IT. YOU MUST BE *HOPELESSLY UNDER-INSURED!*


WHAT WILL I *DO,* MR MILLER?
I'D BE *GLAD* TO EXAMINE *ALL* OF YOUR DIAMONDS, MRS HODGES! I'D BE *GLAD* TO GIVE YOU AN *ESTIMATE* OF THEIR *CURRENT VALUE! THEN* YOU CAN BE *ADEQUATELY PROTECTED...*


WOULD YOU, MR. MILLER? OH *WOULD* YOU DO THAT? I'LL BRING THEM HOME FROM MY VAULT BOX *TOMORROW...*
TILL *TOMORROW NIGHT,* THEN, MRS HODGES!

YES, UNGER'D *MADE* HIS *BID* FOR A *GRAND SLAM!* HE'D HURRIED BACK TO HIS OWN APARTMENT AND UNWRAPPED THE PACKAGE OF PLASTILENE CLAY...

...AND HE'D SLIT THE BRICK OF CLAY NEATLY IN TWO



HE'D LEFT THE CLAY ON THE COFFEE TABLE AND HE'D GONE OUT, THROUGH THE LOBBY, PAST THE FRONT DESK... THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN...

GOOD EVENING, MR. MILLER!

GOOD EVENING, ROY!

...AND HE'D RETURNED SOME TIME LATER, *ROARING DRUNK*...

WHERE'SH EVVYBOODY? HEY! ROY! FRONT! HEY! ...HIC...

P-PLEASE, MR. MILLER! YOU'LL DISTURB THE OTHER TENENTS!

I FERGOT MY KEY HIC... *ROY! I'M... LOCKED UP! ER... OUT!*

I'LL LET YOU *IN*, MR MILLER. I LL GET THE *PASS-KEY!* PLEASE BE QUIET!

IT HAD ALL WORKED SO NICELY..SO PERFECTLY. ROY'D GOTTEN THE PASS-KEY... THE WONDERFUL MASTER KEY THAT WOULD UNLOCK THE DOOR TO A QUARTER OF A MILLION DOLLARS FOR UNGER...

THERE YOU ARE, MR. MILLER!

YOU'RE A *GOO' KID*, ROY! YOU'RE A *DOLL!* YOU... YOU...

AND UNGER'D COLLAPSED SO REALISTICALLY

MR. *MILLER?* YOU *ALL RIGHT?*

YOU YOU BETTER FIX ME SOME *COFFEE*, ROY!

AND SO, WHILE ROY'D PUTTERED IN THE KITCHEN, UNGER'D PRESSED THE IMPRESSIONS OF THE MASTER PASS-KEY INTO THE WRITING SLABS OF CLAY...ONE FOR EACH SIDE...

AND WHEN ROY'D LEFT, UNGER'D MELTED SOME LEAD, AND HE'D PUT THE TWO SLABS TOGETHER AS A MOLD, AND HE'D POURED THE CAST...

...THE CAST HE NOW HELD IN HIS TREMBLING HAND...USELESS...BUT WITH A $250,000 POTENTIAL...

OH-OH! THE OLD GUY'S CLOSIN' UP SHOP!

UNGER WATCHED THE OLD MAN POCKET THE KEY TO THE SHOP AND START TOWARD HIM. IT WAS *NOW* OR *NEVER*...

OOPS! I I *BEG* YOUR PARDON!

MY FAULT! *SORRY!* I WASN'T LOOKING WHERE I WAS GOING!

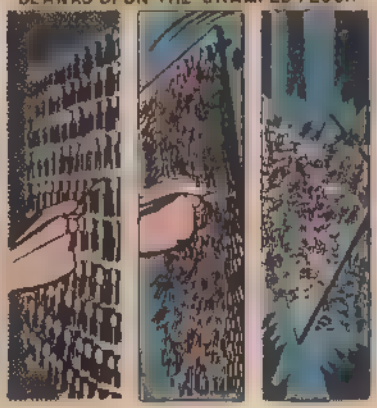
UNGER WATCHED THE OLD MAN HOBBLE DOWN THE STREET INTO THE GATHERING DARKNESS. HE SMILED DOWN AT THE KEY TO THE LOCKSMITH SHOP HE'D PICKED FROM THE OLD MAN'S POCKET. . .

WHEN DARKNESS CAME, HE LET HIMSELF INTO THE SHOP. . .

HE LOCKED THE DOOR BEHIND HIM AND PUT THE KEY TO THE SHOP ON THE WORKBENCH BESIDE THE KEY-MAKING MACHINE AND TOOK OUT THE LEAD CAST. . .

HE TURNED TO THE BOARD. . . THE BOARD UPON WHICH HUNDREDS OF BLANKS HUNG. . .

HE FOUND THE MATCHING BLANK. HE REACHED FOR IT. THE BOARD CAME LOOSE FROM THE WALL, CRASHING DOWN, SPILLING THE BLANKS UPON THE CRAMPED FLOOR

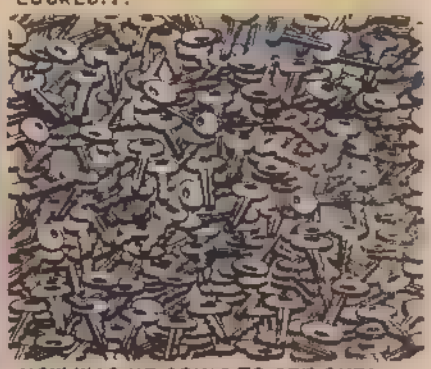


HE FROZE. OUTSIDE THE SHOP, FOOTSTEPS ECHOED. A COP. . . ON HIS BEAT. . .

THE FOOTSTEPS FADED AWAY INTO THE NIGHT. UNGER SIGHED WITH RELIEF AND BENT TO PICK THE BLANK HE NEEDED. . . KNOCKING OVER A BOX OF DISCARDED BADLY-MADE KEYS. . .

HE CURSED SOFTLY HE FOUND THE CORRECT BLANK AND STOOD UP. HE TURNED TO THE MACHINE, ACCIDENTLY BRUSHING THE KEY TO THE SHOP DOOR FROM THE BENCH. . .

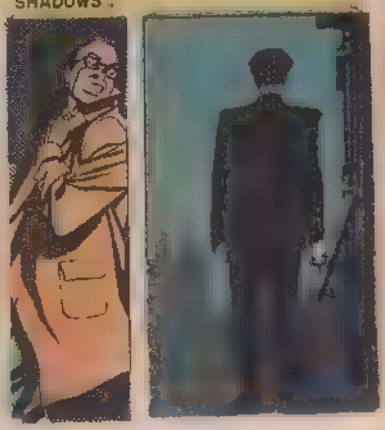
HE LOOKED DOWN AT THE PILE OF KEYS COVERING THE TINY SHOP FLOOR. A COLD CHILL CREPT UP HIS SPINE. HE LOOKED AT THE FRONT DOOR HE'D LOCKED. . .



HOW WAS HE GOING TO GET OUT?

His mission forgotten, he began to try key after key.. picking them from the pile and inserting them in the front door lock...failing... trying again...failing..growing more and more desperate...

Fear gripped him. He froze as the footsteps returned. The cop again! Unger cowered in the shadows.



The policeman passed. Unger's sleeve caught the handle of a bench drawer, pulling it out, spilling its contents upon the floor. More keys...

For a wild moment, he almost smashed the glass but the footsteps returned. He couldn't do that! The cop would hear it...

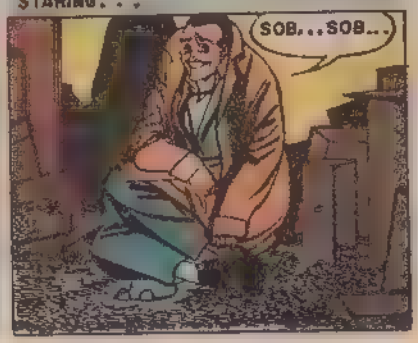
He groveled among the mass of keys on the floor...trying one.. discarding it onto the bench... trying again...

He tried and failed for an hour...

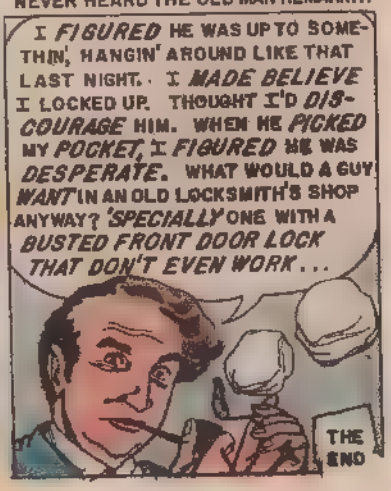
His legs ached from his cramped position. He stood up, swaying, stumbling against the bench, knocking the keys he'd tried back onto the floor...

The keys glittered. The walls seemed to close in. Unger giggled. He started all over again...trying... failing...trying...

The old man found him in the morning, sitting in the middle of the tiny shop's floor. Every drawer had been opened and emptied... every key in the shop spilled out. Unger sat among them... crying softly...his eyes glazed and staring...



They came and took him away. He never heard the old man remark...


I *FIGURED* HE WAS UP TO SOMETHIN', HANGIN' AROUND LIKE THAT LAST NIGHT. I *MADE BELIEVE* I LOCKED UP. THOUGHT I'D *DISCOURAGE* HIM. WHEN HE *PICKED* MY *POCKET*, I *FIGURED* HE WAS *DESPERATE*. WHAT WOULD A GUY *WANT* IN AN OLD LOCKSMITH'S SHOP ANYWAY? *'SPECIALLY* ONE WITH A *BUSTED FRONT DOOR LOCK THAT DON'T EVEN WORK*...
THE END

The SQUEALER

ZIMMER STOOD OVER THE FRIGHTENED, RABBIT-FACED, WHIMPERING ROBBERY SUSPECT .BREATHING HARD AND RUBBING HIS BRUISED KNUCKLES. HE NOTED WITH SADISTIC SATISFACTION THE RIBBON OF SCARLET THAT TRICKLED FROM THIS TWO-BIT STICK-UP-ARTIST'S QUIVERING MOUTH. IT WOULDN'T BE *LONG* NOW! A MAN *CAN'T TAKE TOO MUCH!* A MAN CAN ABSORB *JUST SO MUCH BRUTAL PUNISHMENT* AND THEN HE JUST *HAS TO CRACK!* THE DESIRE TO *SURVIVE* IS *STRONG!* THE UNCONSCIOUS *NEED* OF *LIFE* ALWAYS *OUTWEIGHS* THE CONSEQUENCES OF ANY DEAL TO *PRESERVE* THAT LIFE, NO MATTER *WHAT* THEY MAY BE...EVEN IF THEY MAY MEAN SPENDING THE *REMAINDER* OF THAT LIFE BEHIND *BARS*. LIFE IN PRISON IS *STILL SURVIVAL*. LIFE IN PRISON IS STILL NOT *FINALITY*...THE *IRREVOCABLE END*...*DEATH*...

ALL RIGHT, WAXY? HAD *ENOUGH*? OR DO I *START* ALL OVER?

NO, ZIMMER! *NO!* DON'T...SOB. *HIT* ME AGAIN. I...CHOKE. I COULDN'T *TAKE* IT! I...*I'LL* SIGN! I'LL...SOB...I'LL *SIGN* THE *CONFESSION!*

GEO. EVANS

LIEUTENANT ZIMMER NODDED TO SERGEANT BRONSEN

GIVE IM THE CONFESSION, BERT!

HERE Y'ARE, WAXY! *NOW* YOU'RE BEING *SMART!*

Y-YEAH ..

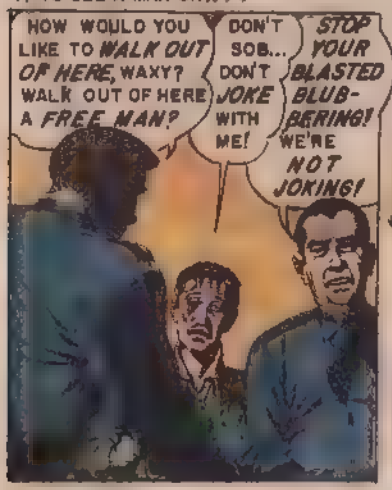
THE THREE-TIME-LOSER STUDIED THE NEATLY-TYPED CONFESSION. ZIMMER HANDED HIM A PEN. HE HESITATED, LOOKING UP AT THE DETECTIVE'S GRIM FACE WITH TEAR-FILLED EYES. ZIMMER'S FISTS CLOSED THE KNUCKLES TURNING WHITE. WAXY SIGNED..

YOU *KNOW* WHAT THIS *MEANS*, DON'T YOU, WAXY?

I...CHOKE... I *KNOW!*

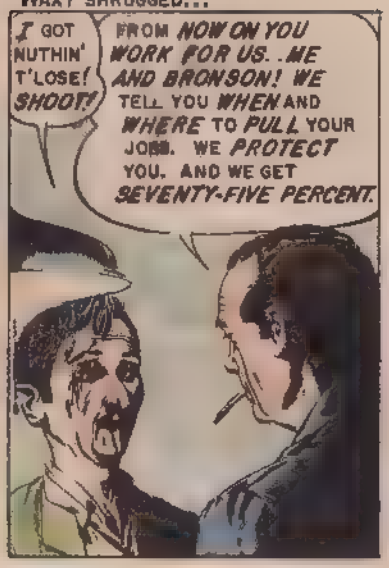
IT MEANS *LIFE*, WAXY! *LIFE* IN THE *STATE PEN!*

WAXY PUT HIS HEAD IN HIS HANDS AND BEGAN TO CRY. ZIMMER TURNED AWAY IN DISGUST, HE COULDN'T STAND IT TO SEE A MAN CRY...

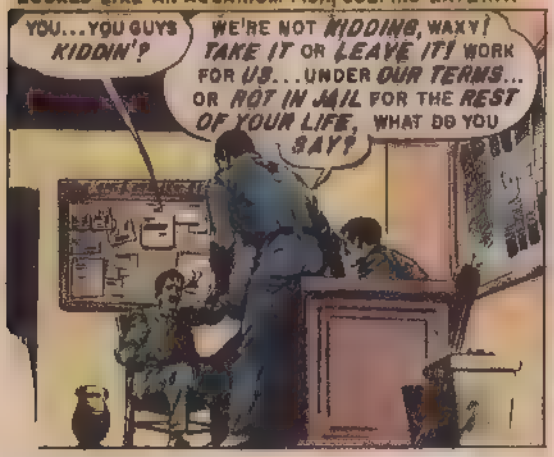

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO WALK OUT OF HERE, WAXY? WALK OUT OF HERE A FREE MAN?
DON'T SOB... DON'T JOKE WITH ME!
STOP YOUR BLASTED BLUBBERING! WE'RE NOT JOKING!

WAXY STARED AT THESE GRIM-FACED LAW ENFORCERS...STARED AT THEM IN DISBELIEF...

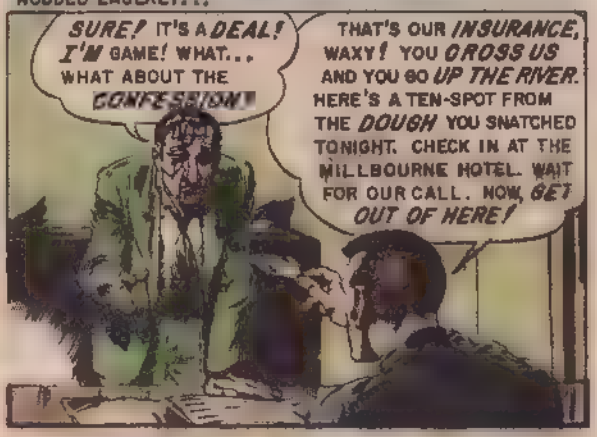
WAXY SHRUGGED...


I GOT NUTHIN' T'LOSE! SHOOT!
FROM NOW ON YOU WORK FOR US. .ME AND BRONSON! WE TELL YOU WHEN AND WHERE TO PULL YOUR JOBS. WE PROTECT YOU. AND WE GET SEVENTY-FIVE PERCENT.

WAXY'S JAW SAGGED. HIS MOUTH DROPPED OPEN HE LOOKED LIKE AN AQUARIUM FISH, GULPING WATER...


YOU...YOU GUYS KIDDIN'?
WE'RE NOT KIDDING, WAXY! TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT! WORK FOR US...UNDER OUR TERMS... OR ROT IN JAIL FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, WHAT DO YOU SAY?

WAXY STOOD UP...TRYING TO THINK OF SOMETHING TO DO WITH HIS HANDS TO HIDE HOW MUCH THEY SHOOK. HE NODDED EAGERLY...


SURE! IT'S A DEAL! I'M GAME! WHAT... WHAT ABOUT THE CONFESSION?
THAT'S OUR INSURANCE, WAXY! YOU CROSS US AND YOU GO UP THE RIVER. HERE'S A TEN-SPOT FROM THE DOUGH YOU SNATCHED TONIGHT. CHECK IN AT THE MILLBOURNE HOTEL. WAIT FOR OUR CALL. NOW, GET OUT OF HERE!

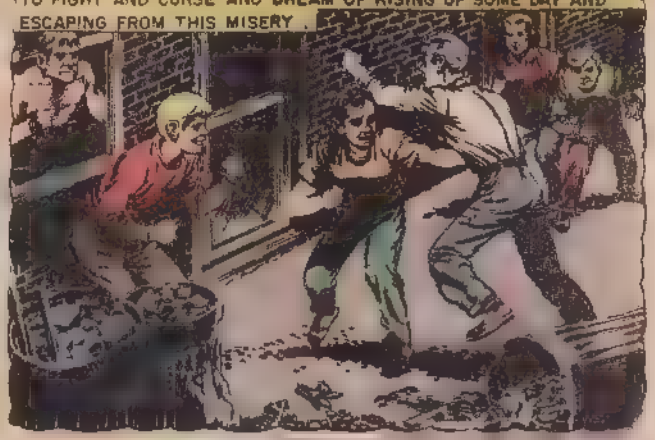
WAXY PICKED UP HIS HAT. HE LOOKED AROUND, WONDERING IF HE WERE STILL CONSCIOUS, OR IF THIS WERE ALL SOME CRAZY DREAM. HE FELT HIS PUFFED CHEEKS... HIS SPLIT LIP HIS BLACKENED EYE. AND HE KNEW THAT THIS WAS NO DREAM. THIS WAS REAL! UGLY .DIRTY UNBELIEVABLY REAL!...

WAXY SLAMMED THE DOOR AND THEY LISTENED TO HIS RAT-LIKE FOOTSTEPS DISAPPEAR DOWN THE STATION-HOUSE HALL. THEN ZIMMER BEGAN TO LAUGH...

WE GOT OURSELVES ANOTHER SUCKER, BERT. HEH ..HEH
DON'T YOU THINK WE'RE OVERDOING IT, ED? I MEAN...HAVEN'T WE GOT ENOUGH? THIS MAKES SEVEN. .

SEVEN...SEVEN... THE WORD ECHOED AWAY INTO THE PAST. LIEUTENANT ED ZIMMER THOUGHT ABOUT THE PAST...ABOUT SEVEN KIDS CRAMMED TOGETHER IN A COLD-WATER FLAT...SHIVERING... HUNGRY . AND HIM THE YOUNGEST AND THE COLDEST AND THE HUNGRIEST

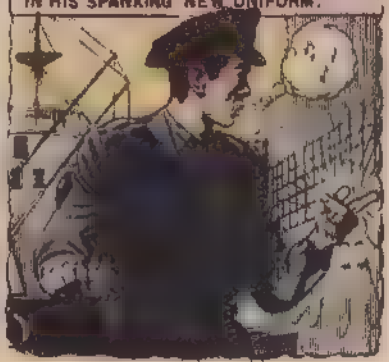
HE THOUGHT ABOUT DIRTY TENEMENT STREETS ..RAT-INFESTED ALLEYS.. GARBAGE-STREWN BACK YARDS...WHERE HE'D LEARNED TO FIGHT AND CURSE AND DREAM OF RISING UP SOME DAY AND ESCAPING FROM THIS MISERY .



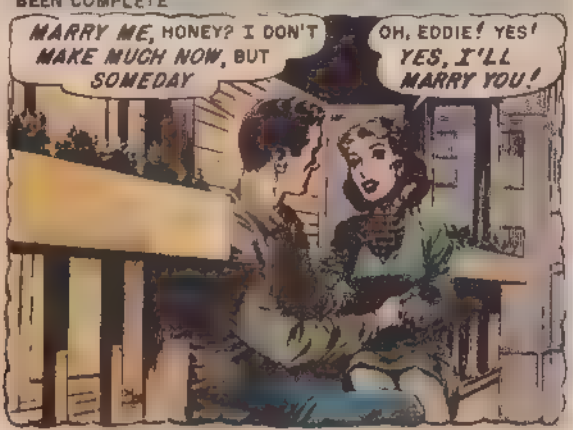
HE THOUGHT ABOUT HOW SEVEN KIDS FROM AN EAST SIDE TENEMENT FAMILY HAD *ENDED UP*...HOW ONE HAD DIED AT 10, OF *PNEUMONIA*...HOW ONE HAD BEEN KILLED BY A *TRUCK*...HOW HE'D SEEN HIS TWO *ELDER BROTHERS* LYING ON COLD SLABS IN THE MORGUE WITH *GANGLAND BULLETS* IN THEIR BODIES

HE THOUGHT OF HIS ONLY SISTER REDUCED TO WALKING THE *STREETS* ...AND HIS *REMAINING* BROTHER RUNNING AWAY TO JOIN THE *MERCHANT MARINE*, ONLY TO BE *TORPEDOED* AND *DROWNED* IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE WAR. AND HE REMEMBERED JOINING THE FORCE ..

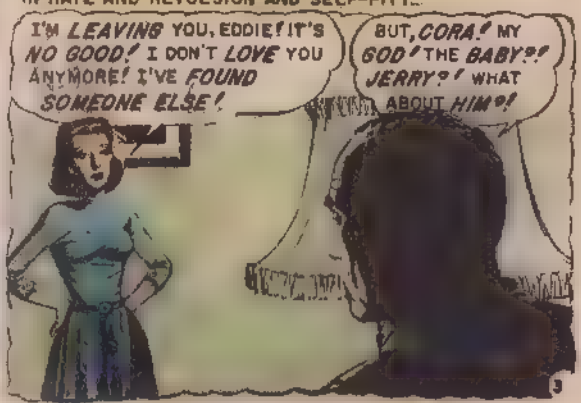
HE'D WANTED TO *MAKE* SOMETHING OF HIMSELF. HE'D WANTED TO *BE* SOMEBODY. A COP MADE *GOOD MONEY* IN THOSE DAYS. AND THERE WERE CHANCES FOR *ADVANCEMENT*. HE'D WORKED *HARD* AND PASSED HIS EXAMS...AND HE'D BEEN SO *PROUD* WHEN HE'D WALKED HIS FIRST BEAT IN HIS SPANKING NEW UNIFORM.



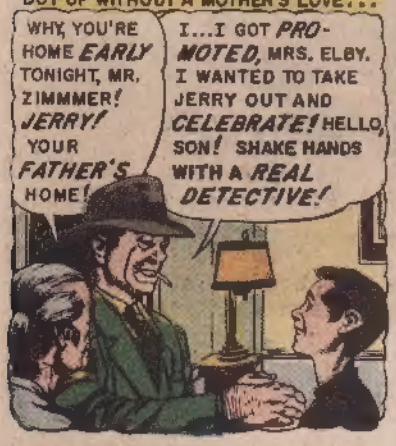
PATROLMAN ED ZIMMER. IT'D SOUNDED GOOD...HONEST.. CLEAN! AND THEN HE'D MET *CORA*, AND HIS LIFE HAD BEEN COMPLETE



CORA. EDDIE THOUGHT OF CORA AND HE FELT HIS STOMACH ROIL...FELT HIS EYES SMART...FELT HIS FINGERNAILS DIG INTO HIS PALMS AS HE TIGHTENED HIS FISTS IN HATE AND REVULSION AND SELF-PITY..


I'M *LEAVING* YOU, EDDIE! IT'S *NO GOOD!* I DON'T *LOVE* YOU ANYMORE! I'VE *FOUND SOMEONE ELSE!*
BUT, *CORA!* MY *GOD!* THE *BABY?!* *JERRY?!* WHAT ABOUT *HIM?!*

JERRY! EDDIE THOUGHT ABOUT HIS BOY. THAT'S WHO THIS WAS ALL FOR! JERRY! HE'D SEE TO IT THAT JERRY WOULD AMOUNT TO SOMETHING. HE THOUGHT ABOUT THOSE EARLY YEARS... BRINGING A BOY UP WITHOUT A MOTHER'S LOVE...


WHY, YOU'RE HOME EARLY TONIGHT, MR. ZIMMMER! JERRY! YOUR FATHER'S HOME!
I...I GOT PROMOTED, MRS. ELBY. I WANTED TO TAKE JERRY OUT AND CELEBRATE! HELLO, SON! SHAKE HANDS WITH A REAL DETECTIVE!

POOR JERRY! ED HAD HAD TO LEAVE HIM WITH NURSEMAIDS AND BABY SITTERS UNTIL HE WAS OLD ENOUGH TO TAKE CARE OF HIMSELF...

WELL, JERRY WASN'T GOING TO END UP A COP... OR A MERCHANT SEAMAN... OR A BODY ON A MARBLE SLAB. JERRY WAS GOING TO BE SOMEBODY. THAT'S WHY ED HAD GONE INTO THIS...

IT'D BEGUN THE NIGHT HE'D SPOTTED THE PICKPOCKET OPERATING IN THE INTERMISSION CROWD POURING OUT OF THE THEATER FOR A QUICK SMOKE...

THE PICKPOCK HAD LIFTED OVER TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY DOLLARS IN CASH... PLUS ASSORTED WALLETS... IN THE SPACE OF FIVE MINUTES. ED HAD FOUND THE EVIDENCE ON HIM AT HEADQUARTERS...

THEY'D STOOD IN THE QUIET LITTLE INTERROGATION ROOM AND THE DIP HAD MADE HIS OFFER...

WHAT IF YOU HADN'T PINCHED ME, COPPER? I'D'VE MADE OFF WITH THE DOUGH AND ALL YOU'D BE GETTING IS COMPLAINTS! LET ME GO, AND THE DOUGH IS YOURS!
WHY YOU LITTLE...

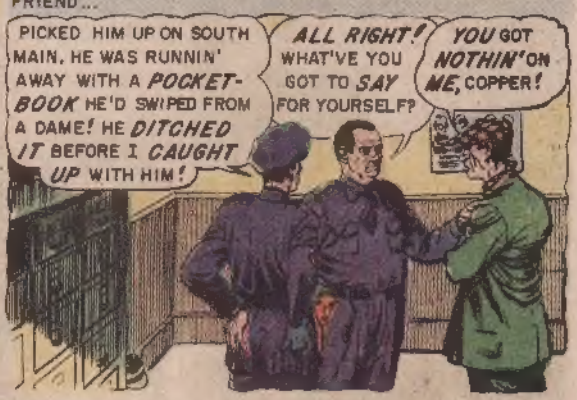
...AND THE MONEY'D GLEAMED INVITINGLY UNDER THE SINGLE BRIGHT LIGHT...

THINK IT OVER, COPPER. NOBODY BUT YOU KNOWS YOU FOUND THE LOOT! I'M NOT GOING TO SQUEAL! TAKE IT! KEEP IT! JUST LET ME LAM OUT!
I... I... GET OUT! GO AHEAD! GET OUT!

IT'D BEEN SO EASY... THE ANSWER TO EVERYTHING. ED HAD LET THE SUSPECT GO AND POCKETED THE TWO-FIFTY AND MADE OUT HIS REPORT. AND THEN HE'D THOUGHT ABOUT A PLAN... A PLAN THAT WOULD *REALLY* PAY OFF. AND HE'D TAKEN BRONSON INTO HIS CONFIDENCE...

YOU *GET* IT, BERT? WE *BEAT THESE GUYS UP* TILL THEY *SIGN CONFESSIONS*. THEN WE *LET 'EM GO* AND *USE* THE CONFESSIONS AS *WHIPS* TO KEEP 'EM IN *LINE*. AND THEY *WORK FOR US*. *WE* GET A *HEAVY CUT!*
I DON'T *KNOW*, ED! SOUNDS *RISKY!*

BRONSON'D BALKED AT FIRST BUT THEN HE'D COME AROUND. THERE WAS A SHOW GIRL... AND BRONSON'D NEEDED DOUGH TOO... MORE THAN THE CITY PAID HIM. SO ED HAD HAD HIS KID, JERRY... AND BRONSON'D HAD HIS SHOWGIRL FRIEND...


PICKED HIM UP ON SOUTH MAIN. HE WAS RUNNIN' AWAY WITH A *POCKETBOOK* HE'D SWIPED FROM A DAME! HE *DITCHED IT* BEFORE I *CAUGHT UP* WITH HIM!
ALL RIGHT! WHAT'VE YOU GOT TO *SAY* FOR YOURSELF?
YOU GOT *NOTHIN'* ON *ME*, COPPER!

THEY'D WORKED OVER HIM... BRUTALLY... SADISTICALLY...

...UNTIL... FINALLY...

SO THE 'ORGANIZATION' HAD BEGUN...

AND THE MONEY'D BEGUN TO ROLL IN...

GOT A CALL FROM A FAMILY IN *BRIARWOOD*, ED! THEY WANT THEIR *HOUSE* WATCHED WHILE THEY'RE *AWAY!* LOOKS LIKE A *GOOD TOUCH!* I'LL CALL HURLEY! IT'S *HIS* KIND OF *JOB!*
5TH PCT

THEY'D USED THEIR POSITION AND THE INFORMATION AT THEIR DISPOSAL TO *TIP* THEIR 'ORGANIZATION' ON *JOBS*... *SOFT* JOBS... *SURE* JOBS...

SOMETIMES THEY'D HAD TO WORK HARD TO EXTRACT THE CONFESSIONS...

BUT ZIMMER'D *WELCOMED* THE CHANCE. THERE WAS A LOT OF *RESENTMENT* IN ZIMMER... A LOT OF *HATE*... A LOT OF *ANGER*. HE'D POURED IT *OUT* ON THESE SMALL-TIME CROOKS...

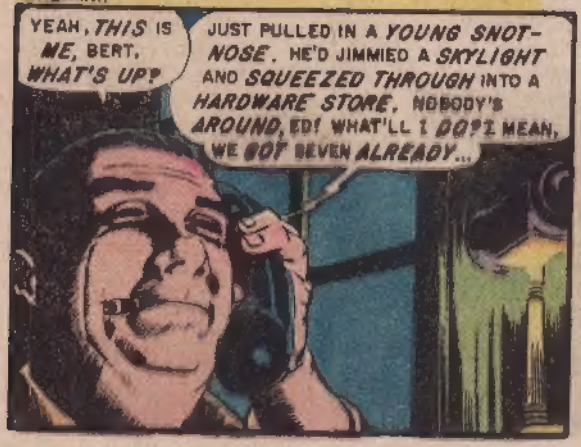
ZIMMER *DESPISED* THE SOCIETY THAT HAD CONDEMNED HIM TO A *TENEMENT UPBRINGING* AND KEPT HIM CHAINED TO AN *UNDER-PAID JOB* AND DEPRIVED HIS SON OF *OPPORTUNITY*. HE'D *REVOLTED* AGAINST IT IN *THIS WAY*... AND HE'D TAKEN HIS *GUILTY ANGER* OUT ON HIS *VICTIMS*...

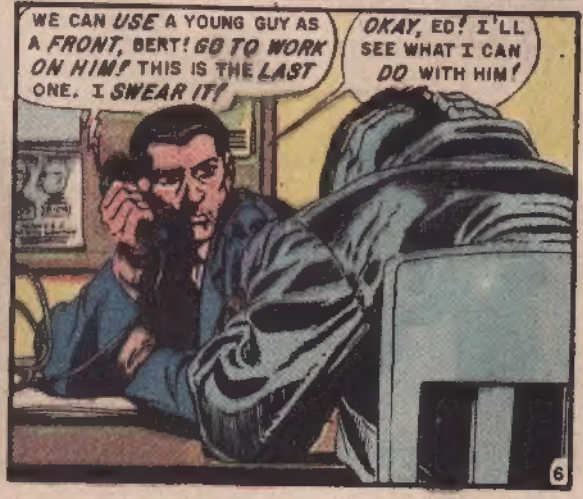
AND SO HE'D GOTTEN ENLISTEES IN HIS REVOLT... ONE BY ONE... UNTIL THERE WERE SEVEN. *SEVEN*. THE WORD ECHOED BACK FROM THE PAST. ZIMMER SNARLED...

I MEAN, THIS MAKES *SEVEN GUYS*, ED! ISN'T THAT *ENOUGH*?
WAXY'S A *GOOD SAFE CRACKER!* WE *NEED* ONE! NOW *SHUT UP* AND *DIVVY THE DOUGH* HE HAD ON HIM WHEN WE PULLED HIM-IN!

LIEUTENANT ED ZIMMER SMILED DOWN AT THE LITTLE BLACK NUMBERS IN THE BOOK AT HIS DESK AT HOME THAT NIGHT...

THE TELEPHONE INTERRUPTED ZIMMER'S PATERNAL DREAM...


YEAH, *THIS* IS *ME*, BERT. *WHAT'S UP*?
JUST PULLED IN A *YOUNG SNOT-NOSE*. HE'D JIMMIED A *SKYLIGHT* AND *SQUEEZED THROUGH* INTO A *HARDWARE STORE*. NOBODY'S *AROUND*, ED! WHAT'LL I *DO*? I MEAN, WE *GOT* SEVEN *ALREADY*...



LIEUTENANT ZIMMER HUNG UP AND WENT BACK TO HIS DESK. HE SMILED DOWN AGAIN AT THE FIGURES IN THE BANKBOOK. THEN HE LOOKED AT THE CLOSED BEDROOM DOOR BEYOND WHICH JERRY SLEPT PEACEFULLY...

HE OPENED THE DOOR SILENTLY... PEERED IN AT THE RUMPLED SLEEPING HULK ON THE BED IN THE DARK ROOM...

THE PHONE BEGAN TO RING. HE CLOSED JERRY'S DOOR AND HURRIED TO ANSWER IT...

YEAH? IT'S *ME* AGAIN, ED...BERT! THE...THE KID *SIGNED* THE CONFESSION AND WHEN I MADE HIM THE *DEAL*, HE *REFUSED!* HE SAID HE WAS GONNA *SQUEAL!*

WHAT?! *LISTEN, WILL YUH?* HE SAID HE WAS WILLING TO *TAKE* HIS PUNISHMENT...*PAY* FOR HIS CRIME! HE SAID *I* WAS AS BIG A CROOK AS *HIM!* HE SAID...HE... I GOT *SCARED*, ED! I... I STARTED *HITTIN'* HIM! I...I...CHOKE...

WHAT'D YOU *DO*, BERT? I...I *KILLED* HIM! I MUST'VE *HIT* HIM TOO HARD. I...I...YOU *BETTER COME DOWN*, ED! YOU GOTTA *HELP* ME! YOU'RE IN THIS *WITH* ME! *YOU GOTTA!* YOU... SOB...YOU...SOB...SOB...

ED ZIMMER, LIEUTENANT, POLICE DEPARTMENT, DETECTIVE DIVISION, HUNG UP IN DISGUST. HE HATED TO HEAR A MAN CRY. HE WENT INTO THE BEDROOM TO GET HIS COAT. HE TIPTOED INTO JERRY'S ROOM TO COVER HIM. HE STARED AT THE RUMPLED HULK THAT WAS *NO SLEEPING BOY AT ALL*...

ED ZIMMER WILL *NEVER REMEMBER* HOW HE *GOT* TO HEADQUARTERS THAT EARLY PRE-DAWN MORNING. HE'LL *NEVER REMEMBER* THE *WILD SIREN-SCREAMING RIDE*. BUT HE'LL *ALWAYS REMEMBER* BURSTING INTO THE DESERTED INTERROGATION ROOM AND STARING DOWN AT THE *BEATEN AND BLOODY BODY OF HIS SON ON THE FLOOR*...

...AND HE'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER CRYING!

THE END